







Class PZ 7

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"If you can only get to that rock sticking its nose up yonder, I believe you can make the riffle," said Alec, pointing. [Page 63]



# Motorcycle Chums in The Land of The Sky

OR

*Thrilling Adventures on the  
Carolina Border*

By ANDREW CAREY LINCOLN

## CHAPTER I

### THE TROUBLES OF BUDGE

"Come, get a move on, Budge!"

"Yes, Budge, wake up, and quit dreaming. It's nearly two o'clock now; and besides, Alec says he's afraid a storm is going to chase us over these bum Virginia roads!"

"And just remember that the tavern where we expect to stop overnight is fifteen miles and more ahead! Hey! Budge, stir your stumps!"

The aforesaid "Budge" rubbed his heavy eyes with his fat knuckles, and arose from his comfortable mossy seat beside a gurgling mountain creek, yawning, and also stretching his chubby figure at a great rate.

Budge was certainly inclined to be fat; and his three energetic, wide-awake companions often accused him of being lazy in the bargain. This he always denied, and put forward the plea



that, as he weighed half again as much as any one of them, it stood to reason that he could not display the same amount of agility.

"Oh! there you go again, as usual!" he complained. "It's always jump lively now; or get a hustle on you, Budge! I never have any peace. You fellows are bent on rushing things to beat the band. Hang it! Rome wasn't built in a day. What's the use going off like that in a mad whirl? Let's change our pace, and take it just leisurely like, fellows!"

"But Budge, once you're started on your motorcycle it hadn't ought to be a tiresome job to just sit there, and guide the machine, which does all the work!" suggested a tall, well-built boy, who somehow seemed to be looked on as a sort of natural leader of the quartet, and whose name was Alec Travers.

"Sure it wouldn't, if a fellow could only do the sitting act," returned the fat boy, promptly. "But d'ye know that I was off my wheel eleven times since breakfast! Twice that pesky magneto gave me bother. Seven other times the carbureter went back on me; and the last time, you know, Jack had to wait up to fix it. I climbed six long hills on foot, and pushed the rotten machine ahead all the way. Ain't that enough to make me tired? I don't like stumping one bit. Nature didn't build me for a walker, and you know it. So there!"



Each one of these four young fellows had an almost brand new motorcycle of the latest improved make. That of Alec had evidently seen more service than any of the rest, though still in splendid shape, because he believed in taking good care of so valuable a possession.

Budge was really Nelson Clifford. Boys often give a companion a name that seems to be just the opposite to that which he deserves; and so he had come to be called Budge because, as a rule, he was very set in his way, and wouldn't budge a bit.

One of the other pair was Ambrose Codling, a lanky chap with a shrewd face, and the build of a runner; who rejoiced in the shorter nick-name of "Freckles," because he could always develop a full supply on the shortest notice. His father was a physician in the Northern town of Staunton, where these lads belonged.

The last motorcycle boy was Jack Kinkaid. He had a natural liking for all manner of machinery, which he came by honestly; since his father was the designer of the little Kinkaid engine that promised to revolutionize aviation.

Each of them had chosen to call their machine by a name that would distinguish it from the others. Thus Alec's had always been known as the "Comet;" Freckles invariably stamped his as the



“Cannonball Limited,” when speaking of it, for he was fond of rushing things; Jack on his part was content to use the word “Rocket;” while fat Budge, perhaps in a spirit of sarcasm, dubbed his “Old Hurricane;” for in his clumsy hands it was usually booming along with more noise than the other three combined, and getting its owner into all manner of scrapes.

During the preceding summer Alec had been the sole owner of a roadster that was built to climb hills at a merry pace. The others of the four chums had to be content with ordinary bicycles. But they had managed to coax their folks to present them with new models. Even Jack had secured the balance needed from his father; for a capitalist had fancied the latest invention, and advanced lots of money for a controlling interest in the new engine.

Alec was an orphan, with a jolly guardian named Mr. Worthington. He had recently been told that it was of the greatest importance that he should personally go down to North Carolina by a certain date, in order to carry out the provisions of his father’s will.

Just what he was expected to do when he reached his destination Alec himself did not know; though he expected that it might have something to do with signing documents before an official of the county in which some of the



property chanced to lie that was to become his.

He conceived the idea of making the journey on his motorcycle. And when his three chums heard this they suggested that it would be just a glorious thing if only they could secure similar means of locomotion, and accompany him.

Just what wonderful arguments they advanced at home need not be stated here. Let it be enough for us to know that they managed to win out; and in due time a start had been made for the Southern Land of the Sky, as the region around Ashville in North Carolina is called.

There was also a bit of tantalizing mystery connected with their trip, that seemed to constantly arouse the interest and curiosity of the boys the more they talked it over.

It came about in this way:

Just before their start Mr. Worthington called Alec into the library, and handed him a closely sealed little packet, which he had wrapped in oiled silk. All he would say with regard to the same was that it must not be opened, or lost on the road; and when they reached their destination in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina, he was to search for and deliver the packet to some one named Theodore Warrendale, from whom he might learn something that would surprise him.

Of course Alec's chums had heard all about



that mysterious little packet; and many had been the guesses connected with it. Some of these were shrewd, and may have come near the truth; while others evoked roars of laughter; particularly when Budge put on his wonderful thinking cap, and suggested the most ridiculous explanations ever dreamed of.

All the same it was often on the minds of Alec and his friends. Many times when they rested at noon, and ate their lunch, the boys would quietly take out that queer little packet, and look at it with kindling eyes. But he respected his guardian's wishes in the matter, and never once thought of trying to peep inside that oiled-silk cover.

Of course, by this time even Budge knew how to run his motorcycle; though being naturally clumsy, he certainly was forever doing things to put it temporarily out of commission, so that the machinist, Jack, had more or less tinkering on his hands. It was a standing joke with the others that Budge would do the wrong thing, even if there were nine "rights," and but one otherwise.

But with all he was so good-natured, and his smile so sunny, that no one could get mad at him. And taken as a lot, the four travelers by this novel means of locomotion formed about as jolly a quartet as could be found anywhere.



As a rule they figured on putting up nights in towns along the way. Sometimes it had become necessary to stop over in queer places; and they had many adventures to laugh over in connection with life in these country taverns of Maryland and Virginia.

Alec had intended at first carrying his gun along. He found, however, that such a piece of baggage would be considerably in the way during the long, rough journey. Besides, they did not expect to do much camping out, except when forced to stop between stations by some accident. Jack had also suggested that if they appeared to be an armed posse, they might be taken for revenue men by some of the mountaineers, who were engaged in defrauding the government by manufacturing and selling moonshine whiskey.

So Alec had compromised things by securing a little reliable automatic pistol, which he carried on his person as a rule.

They had had the greatest difficulty in keeping Budge from fastening all sorts of things to his motorcycle before the start was made, so that as Freckles declared, he looked like a wandering peddler on his travel. He had a coffee pot, a big fryingpan, a fishing rod in a case, yes, and even his banjo, upon which he hoped to "strum," as he called it, at various times along the route.



This last had proven the straw to break the camel's back. Freckles vowed that if that instrument of torture (in the hands of Budge, he meant) went along, he was of a mind to stay at home; for he had a poor opinion of Southern jails; and he just knew the whole bunch would be arrested for "murdering music."

One by one they stripped poor Budge of the articles he had his heart set on; so that when he started he carried little besides the knapsack containing his extra clothes; and a blanket, the latter to be used in case they were caught out nights.

He never ceased complaining about this "shame-faced robbery," as he termed it; even declaring that he had meant to show them how he had improved in his cooking since that time during the last summer when they camped out in the hills beyond Staunton.

"What's the use of coming down south if you don't expect to get baked 'possum and sweet 'taters?" he used to say, pathetically. "And so far, we ain't had never a bite. I'm going to trap a 'possum myself, and show you how it's cooked. You just wait, fellows, and I'll make your mouths water;" but up to now he had not been able to keep his word, as the wily animals must have heard he was coming, and remained up in the trees, hanging from their tails.



Of course the others had to wait for Budge; but this was so regular a happening they thought nothing of it. Finally, after a great deal of grunting and fuming, he managed to get his machine started; and went spinning down the road amid a perfect furore of reports, that would have astonished any native had he chanced to suddenly hear the Gatling gun volleys.

"After him, fellows!" called Alec, who feared that this new freak on the part of Budge would only end in another catastrophe, possibly worse than any of those in the past.

The going was none too nice, and it was not long before they came upon Budge, sitting alongside the road, and fanning himself with his cap.

He had evidently had pretty nearly all the breath joggled from his body, because of the roughness of the way, for he seemed to be gasping.

"Huh!" he remarked, with strong sarcasm in his tones, "strikes me the worm has turned. Who's lazy now, eh? Been waiting up for you nearly three minutes."

"Well, get in your seat again, then;" said Jack, impatiently; "because we don't mean to hang out here. We may have covered three miles, but that's nothing when you can hear thunder getting louder and louder behind you. Up you go, Budge, or we'll have to leave you."



"Oh! say, you wouldn't be cruel enough to do that, now, I hope!" exclaimed the other, bestirring himself. "Why something might carry me off, don't you know? Perhaps there's bears in these parts. I thought I saw something moving in the bushes right before you came up, and was going to find out after I'd caught my breath."

"Get along with you," said Freckles, "and this time don't try to run off; because you see if that storm closes in on us, we may have to hang out somewhere along the road, and you'd be by your lonely. Mind that, Budge!"

"Well, I'll come behind this time, fellows," replied the other, as he prepared for a fresh start, but not without sundry groans. "And Alec, please look over your shoulder every little while. If you miss me, just make up your minds, boys, I'm in trouble; and come back before they eat me all up."

This time the motorcycle boys kept pretty well in a bunch as they sped along over the rough Virginia road, heading southwest. Budge seemed to be spurred to doing his best, for he managed to avoid the different obstacles they met; though, as a rule, one of the others shouted a warning in time to let him know.

The sun had long since vanished. Black clouds covered the heavens in every direction, but particularly was this the case in their rear.



And in quick succession to the dazzling lightning did the growl of the thunder break the silence that brooded over the wild country.

Each time it seemed closer than before. Alec knew that it would be utterly out of the question for them to hope to reach the village where they had intended to spend the next night, before the wild storm broke; and hence he was constantly on the alert now to discover some haven of refuge, however humble, where they could seek shelter from the expected downpour.



## CHAPTER II

## STORM BOUND

"Wait for me, please!" wailed Budge, who had somehow fallen behind.

"Slow up, fellows;" called out Alec, suiting the action to the word himself.

Once again they were close together, with Jack convoying the laggard; for Budge was really afraid to let out any decent sort of speed, the way was so filled with bumps, so that he believed himself in momentary danger of being upset in a heap.

Then again it had become horribly dark and gloomy, what with that inky pall sweeping up from their rear. One would think night must be coming on, instead of the hour being around three in the afternoon.

"Wow!" shouted Freckles as a most startling flash lighted up their immediate surroundings.

It was almost instantly followed by a clap of thunder that sounded as though the "bottom of the sky had fallen out," as Budge said afterwards. It gave him such a scare that he wobbled to and fro from one side of the narrow



country road to the other, and Jack had trouble in avoiding a collision then and there.

"Oh! wasn't that a screamer, though?" cried Budge, after he had succeeded in regaining control over his mount, to which he was accustomed to saying soothing words at such a time, just as though the motorcycle were a horse with nerves.

"It struck a tree only a little ways back; I heard it smash down across the road!" said Jack, with a touch of awe in his voice.

"What luck that we didn't happen to be right there at the time!" declared Budge, who could always be thankful things were no worse, no matter what was happening.

"Perhaps the next one may get us!" said his companion, anxiously looking up at the threatening sky from which the fiery bolts descended.

"I guess not, Jack," the other went on. "We surely didn't come away down here to be knocked out by a flash of lightning, when that could have happened to us right at home. Oh! look at Alec, will you? He sees something, Jack, don't you think? There, he's turning now to wave to us. And what did he say, Jack?"

"Hey! Budge, I reckon you're getting deaf, as well as near-sighted," replied his chum. "Alec tells us to hurry on—that he believes he's located some place where three active motorcycle boys might crawl under shelter."



"Three!" almost shrieked Budge, in sudden alarm. "What's going to become of me, then, tell me that, will you? I refuse to be the scape-goat all the time! If the rest get under, I'm going to come, too, or there'll be lots doing. Oh! I nearly ran you down that time, Jack. Excuse me, please; I didn't mean to do it!"

"That's all right, Budge; of course you didn't mean to—you never do. But Alec has jumped off his wheel. That says we stop here, come what will;" and five seconds later Jack also landed on the road close to the two leaders.

"What do you see, Alec?" cried Budge, as he sprawled from the saddle to his feet—indeed, so clumsy was his movement that no other word could possibly do it justice.

"Follow me, all of you," said the one addressed, eagerly. "I'm sure I saw some sort of log cabin close to the road here, when that bright flash came. Yes, there it is again," as another zigzag electric current cut the heavens above.

"I saw it!" cried Budge, "and it was a cabin too." Then raising his face toward the pitiless black sky he said in a grateful voice, as though he meant every word: "Thank you!"

Each boy was now pushing his heavy wheel ahead, and making for the dimly seen cabin as fast as possible. Another accommodating flash allowed them to make sure that it was an unoc-



cupied building. The door seemed to be hanging on one rusty hinge; and doubtless the roof would be in pretty bad shape.

But among sailors there is an old saying that carried a lot of truth with it, to the effect that any port is welcome in a storm. And none of the boys were apt to complain because things did not happen to be all they could ask.

Dragging the swinging door aside Alec pushed his motorcycle within the place. The others hastened to follow him, for by now the first big drops had begun to patter down, promising a deluge presently.

"Over in this corner, fellows!" Alec sang out, having noticed that one portion of the rickety roof promised better shelter than the remainder.

They parked the four wheels against the wall; and the rapidity of their movements told that they were accustomed to doing this sort of thing. Then each fellow unstrapped the large package which he carried, and from these four rubber ponchos were produced. Two were needed to cover the motorcycles; the balance the boys intended to use in shielding themselves from the little rivulets that had already commenced to trickle through the gaps in the rotten roof above.

All this had been attended to in a wonderfully short space of time; which proved what



system would do to hasten things along. Alec was a good leader, and could be depended on to devise ways and means for meeting every emergency that arose. Indeed, Freckles and Budge had become so used to expecting him to suggest something, that they were in danger of losing their independence of thought.

The storm was now fully upon them. What with the rush of the heavy rain, the almost continual banging of the thunder, and the howl of the wind through the forest trees, the combination was enough to make even a bolder spirit than that of poor Budge quiver with momentary fear that something dreadful was about to happen.

Budge had tucked his head under his blanket, partly to shut out the dazzling light whenever the electricity chose to play; but there must have been something terribly fascinating about it after all, for from time to time Budge would move his head aside, just to take a horrified peep.

Alec and Jack were endeavoring to hold some sort of gruelling confab, with their heads close together. Even then at times they had to fairly shout, such was the racket by which they were surrounded.

"How about the chances of our going on this afternoon?" asked Jack.

"Pretty bad, I should say," replied the other.



"But this is only one of these sudden mountain storms that come and go in a big hurry; it won't last long, Alec," expostulated the other.

"Perhaps not, Jack; but listen to the rain pouring down in a flood. You know what that means, don't you?" Alec went on, soberly.

"Sure. Every little bug stream will be bank-full. Perhaps some bridges might be swept off with the cloudbreak. Well, what then, Alec?"

"We'll have to stay here, poor as the place is," the leader continued, decisively. "Half a loaf is some better than no bread, you know. And I can tell you we're cheating the storm pretty well, with even a broken roof above us. Hear it pouring off that corner, will you. Talk about your shower baths, there's one provided, scot-free; only nobody seems to be aching to take a dip, not even Budge, who wants his share in everything."

"But what can we have for supper? I certain gobbled every bit of the stuff I fetched from that Blue Dog tavern this morning," Jack remarked, ruefully; for like the vast majority of healthy, growing lads, he was hungry pretty much all the time.

"Well, I've got a few things in my pack, not enough to fill us up, but better than nothing. When the rain stops we'll manage to make a fire and warm up."



"Fire? That sure goes to the spot!" exclaimed Freckles who had been shivering close by all this time; being exceedingly thin he was apt to feel a chill quicker than any of the others, particularly Budge.

"Just hold your horses a little Freckles, and we'll all be happy yet," Alec called out encouragingly. "It's coming down so hard that it just can't last. Here, let me get your blanket out, and take copy after wise old Budge, who's stuffed under his like an Esquimau."

Alec was generous by nature. He would stop doing anything in order to relieve a companion's uneasiness of mind. And that was one secret of his great success among the boys of Staunton. They seemed to recognize the unselfish spirit that dominated his actions; and there had never been any time when a leader was needed but what Alec Travers was overwhelmingly elected to fill that high office.

"What's all that noise out yonder, I wonder?" asked Jack.

"I've been listening," replied Alec; "and come to the conclusion that there must be some sort of stream just ahead of the cabin here. Seemed to me I did notice a dark gully at the time we turned in; but I was so anxious to get here I didn't pay much attention to it."

"Well, it's a wild old creek right now, then,"



returned Jack. "Just listen to the way it roars will you? Let that keep up, and it'll make a lake out of this whole low section at the foot of the mountains."

At that, Budge, who had evidently been listening keenly, popped his yellow head out from under the blanket, to utter a cry of dismay.

"Oh! say, looky here, Jack, Alec," he bellowed, "you don't believe it's going to sweep this old cabin away, do you? My goodness! I hope not. What would become of our motors; and yes, what would become of a fellow who didn't know how to swim a stroke?"

"Stick to the roof of the shanty then, Budge," declared Freckles unfeelingly. "It'd make a prime raft, I reckon. Anyhow, you wouldn't sink. A fellow as fat as you just couldn't go down. Think of what would happen to me if I hurt my arm, and couldn't strike out. I'd go down like a rock. I'd—" but another brilliant flash broke in on what Freckles was saying, and he stopped short, to duck his head involuntarily.

"Oh! did you see that monster then?" cried Budge, even before the roll of the thunder could break in to drown his voice.

Both Alec and Jack had eyes, and they had seen the same thing that unnerved the fat boy. Some gaunt looking animal, not unlike a wolf, though possibly it might only be a wild dog of



the mountain region, had burst in through the partly opened door, as though seeking shelter from the storm. It was standing there, glaring at the group of boys as though angry at finding its expected refuge already occupied; and the white flash had disclosed a pair of baleful yellow orbs and two rows of glistening fangs.



## CHAPTER III

## SUPPER BY WIRELESS

Inside the old deserted log cabin it was almost dark, when there happened to be no lightning playing overhead. Still, Alec believed he could just barely make out the crouching figure of the terrible looking beast.

Poor Budge had rolled himself completely in his blanket, and humped back further into the corner among the motorcycles. Never a very brave lad, he had been completely demoralized by the crash of the wild gale, the falling of trees, and the new danger that confronted them in the shape of this unknown beast.

Alec fumbled in his pocket until he found the little automatic pistol, though not daring to once take his eyes from the spot where he could just make out that shadowy figure, for fear lest he lose the animal altogether.

Out went his hand, and then he waited for another flash to come, so that he might not entirely waste ammunition. Jack was close beside him, and probably conscious of what he must be doing; but he refrained from clutching



Alec's arm, or in any other way interfering with his performance.

The seconds seemed horribly long, each being an eternity; for Alec's heart had, as he believed, actually ceased to beat under the tremendous tension. Then without warning the light came again.

He saw that the beast had moved from its former position. It was now several feet closer to the boys, and to one side; but just as before the gleaming eyes and glistening teeth proclaimed that its feeling of pronounced hostility was as great as ever.

Alec waited for no more. Quick as a flash he moved his hand. With an automatic, aim is hardly necessary. One covers the intended mark just as readily and instinctively as though it were the forefinger that it pointed.

One, two, three shots Alec poured in, following so fast upon each other's heels that they seemed almost like the continuation of the first report.

Budge broke out into a yell; and as though by concerted signal all the others joined in to swell the sound. Doubtless the same idea had come to every one of them; which was, that the human voice when raised after this fashion can frighten almost any wild beast, when heard for the first time.

Another lightning flash came while the vol-



ume of sound yet rolled up out of that old shack. And Alec saw with considerable pleasure that the beast had vanished. The three quick flashes, the sharp bark of the firearm; the sting perhaps of the missiles; and last, but far from least, that tremendous volume of boyish shouts, had completed the demoralization of the intruder.

"He's gone!" cried Jack, drawing a big breath of genuine relief.

"Bully for you, Alec! You tickled his hide for him!" added Freckles Codling.

"Oh! what yellow eyes, and terrible teeth! I just know he expected to dine off me, fellows!" exclaimed Budge, from his blanket.

"Well, he's made up his mind that he didn't care to get in here out of the storm, after all; which suits us just as well," remarked Alec; who was himself trembling a little from the excitement of the moment, though none of the others suspected such a thing from the steady tone of his voice.

"Was it a wolf?" asked Freckles.

"To be sure it was," Budge broke in with. "Haven't you seen just such critters in the circus, many the time. And a savage wolf at that, let me tell you. Wow! how he snapped those shiny teeth of his when he saw me. Alec, you saved my life that time, I honestly believe."

Freckles laughed out loud at that, as he observed:



"Funny how some people always want to get in the limelight, ain't it? Budge here thinks he's always IT every time anything happens. Just as if that beast would pass by such a tender morsel as me to grab him."

"Tender morsel—you?" cried the indignant Budge. "Why, if you ever dropped in on a cannibal feast they'd have to parboil you first before toasting. Ten to one they couldn't get a splinter in you without hitting it with a maul. You tender! Huh!"

"But was it a wolf, do you think, Alec?" Jack demanded.

"Honestly, I hardly think so," replied the one who had faced the animal closer than any of his mates, and ought to be in a position to say.

"Why do you say that, Alec, when we all think the other way?" asked Freckles.

"In the first place I doubt very much if there are wolves now in all this region roundabout. Many years ago they roamed the whole country; but even in the mountains of North Carolina they're supposed to be extinct," was the sensible way the other explained his position.

"But what could it have been then?" pursued the determined lengthy one; for as a rule Freckles wanted to know all about things from the very start.

"I think it was cousin to the wolf," Alec went



on. "To be plain, it must have been a dog."

"But no dog would look that savage when he saw human beings!" cried Budge. "With a storm behind him he'd have crept in here cowed, and tried to make friends."

"Oh! there are dogs, and then dogs," laughed Alec. "Now, I think that chap was one of the wild ones, a hater of human kind. That's why he showed his teeth when he found us camped in his quarters here."

"A wild dog!" cried Freckles. "Say, do you mean it, Alec, or are you joshing us?"

"Yes," echoed Budge, showing considerable interest, though he kept watching the spot where he knew the partly open door stood, "are there really any wild dogs?"

"Lots of 'em," came the ready reply. "Now and then some dog feels the call of the wild, and goes back to Nature. They gather in packs in the woods, and get a living just like wolves would do, killing sheep and hunting game. I've heard of such things lots of times. And that shaggy looking yellow terror was just such a renegade, I reckon."

"Hope he don't change his mind, and come back again," remarked Jack.

"Oh! do you think there's any chance of that, fellows?" ejaculated Budge. "Don't you believe it would be better to get that door closed some more?"



"Sure we can, Budge. Here, fellows, the storm is slackening up; and while we have the chance, let's get hold and see what can be done," and Jack himself boldly led the way across to where the unwelcome intruder had so recently stood.

After all they were not able to entirely swing the door shut. Time and the weather had warped it out of shape, more or less. But while the others held the door, Jack fastened it with some stout cord he happened to possess.

"There, how's that?" he demanded, as he completed the task.

"Fine and dandy," replied Alec. "It would have to be a pretty slim dog that could creep through that slit now. But do you notice that the rain seems to have stopped completely?"

"About time," grumbled Freckles. "Listen to that freshet roar, would you? Small chance of getting away from here today, eh, Alec?"

"No use thinking about it," answered the one addressed, promptly. "We'd never be able to get across that stream tonight; and even if we did, who can say how many others lie between here and that tavern. No, boys, we've just got to make the best of a bad bargain, and stay here."

"Well," remarked philosophical Jack, "it might be much worse, you know."



"That's so," echoed Freckles, quick to fall in line. "Our next job will be to get a fire started, and dry things out here. After that, we'll quit shivering, and feel ten times better. Hey, there's Budge lighting up his lantern right now. It's too dark and gloomy in here to suit him."

"Like as not Budge wants to look around a bit, and make sure there isn't another wild dog hiding somewhere about," laughed Jack.

"There he goes, turning the light on in every direction," remarked Alec, as the three stood near the barricaded door, watching the movements of their chum.

"Would you see that?" remarked Freckles, presently; "he's even looking aloft, as if he expected a bobcat now to come sailing through some hole in the roof. Oh!"

A sudden shrill shout from Budge caused this last exclamation on the part of the tall, wiry lad.

"Oh! looky there, will you? Didn't I tell you something would crop up for us to provide a supper? Ain't we like the Children of Israel in the wilderness though? Hurrah! just waiting for us to come along and gobble him, wasn't he, fellows?"

"What ails the boy?" exclaimed Jack.

"He's pointing at something up there, and—well, what d'ye know about that, eh?" Freckles broke out. "See there, Alec, dangling from the



rafter, just for all the world like a prime country-fed ham. Don't you see it now? And after Budge saying what he did about having one with sweet potatoes some fine day! Bully for us! We're in the game!"

"As sure as anything I do believe it's a 'possum!" ejaculated Alec, staring at the suspended object as though he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Course it is!" shouted Budge. "Can't you see his gray hide, and that long ratfile tail he's got twisted around that pole up yonder. Pretends to be asleep; but I bet you he's playing 'possum all right."

"But what's he doing in here?" demanded Freckles. "I understood a 'possum only hid in trees, and slept that way through the day."

"Oh! he thought this was as good a place as any to spend his leisure time," laughed Alec. "Perhaps Budge here sent him a wireless that we'd be along, and he was expected to provide a supper for the crowd."

"He's going to, all right, don't you fret," cried the one mentioned, as he looked around for something with which to poke at the dangling object. "Say, don't this just take the cake, fellows? Talk about your Virginia inns, this old shanty has got 'em all beat to a frazzle. Fried 'possum—yum! yum!"



Budge had laid down his little acetylene searchlight, taken from his motorcycle; and securing a bit of wood that had possibly fallen from the broken roof, began to make wild passes at the dangling animal.

He could not come within six inches of it however; and there was not the slightest movement on the part of the alarmed 'possum to prove that it possessed life. Like the foolish ostrich that, beset on its native desert, hides its head in a little clump of grass, and fancies itself hidden because it can no longer see; so the 'possum believes in "playing dead," with the expectation that the attention of its enemy being removed temporarily, it can slip away and hide.

"Here, gimme that stick, Budge," said Freckles. "You'd never hit him in a year. It takes a tall man to work that racket."

Grumbling something to the effect that valuable goods always came in small packages anyway, Budge handed over the piece of wood. Freckles succeeded better than his companion, and presently dislodged the swinging 'possum. Even when it fell to the ground with a thump the crafty animal refused to show signs of life; and taking no chances Freckles prepared to knock it on the head.

"Make sure work of it," said Budge, eagerly. "Don't let him fool you! Give him a few more



hard ones, Freckles! I'd just feel sick if he got away, after letting us get our mouths fixed for fried 'possum."

"Oh! it's no use; he's a dead one, all right, by now. But just think of him hanging there all the time, and never squeaking once, even when Alec fired at that wolf-dog!" the tall boy remarked.

"What's next, Alec?" asked Jack.

"I should say a fire," came the reply. "But don't let's forget boys, that we've still got a few gallons of explosive gasoline in the tanks of our machines, and ought to be mighty careful how we carry on."

Everybody got busy from that minute. The door was unfastened again, so that a foraging expedition might sally forth, in order to look for dry tinder in the heart of some fallen tree. One of the boys carried a little axe along, the sharp edge being protected by a sheath; for they had anticipated having to camp a few times while on this trip across several states.

The storm had passed, although clouds still hung overhead, making their surroundings gloomy enough, with evening close at hand.

But once a fire had been kindled in the deserted cabin things began to slowly take on a more cheerful aspect.

Presently larger bits of fuel could be used, and



by that time enough heat was generated to begin drying, not only the clothes of the boys, but the interior of the old building as well.

Alec, having spent a year on a Western ranch, was quite at home in many lines. He took it upon himself to prepare the 'possum for cooking; though secretly inclined to believe that the boys might find themselves disappointed when they came to partake of the dish; for to be properly appreciated, the animal, which has a taste not unlike a young pig, should be baked.

Each boy selected a bit of the meat, and did his best to cook it by thrusting a long splinter of wood through the same, and then toasting it near the fire. This was the old-time hunter style all of them had read about in stories of early days, as written by Cooper and others.

Budge made out to enjoy it; but the rest candidly declared they seemed to feel little hankering for 'possum. Fortunately there was enough food in the party to satisfy their craving. Breakfast would have to look out for itself.

Afterward they sat around, with blankets drawn over their shoulders, chatting, and trying to feel that they were enjoying the adventure. But Budge voiced their sentiments pretty well when he grunted after making a move, and declared that his joints seemed to be getting stiff, as if they needed oiling.



And then, when it came to spreading their blankets on the now dried ground, with the idea of getting some sleep, it took them quite some time before the last one had lain down.

The fire was nearly out by now, as they wished to save the balance of the dried wood for morning. Alec was himself slowly yielding to the drowsy god, in spite of his uncomfortable bed, when suddenly he believed he heard sounds from without. He sat up to listen; and at the same time knew from the movements close beside him that some of the others had also been wakeful, and heard the same noises.

Then came a gruff voice calling out:

“Somebody’s in the old cabin, Cap! I smell smoke!”

“Surround the place then. Don’t leave a loophole for ’em to get away! Let the dawgs loose, Zeke!”

Quickly following these loudly uttered words there came a tremendous thumping on the door of the cabin, which the boys had fastened again before lying down.

“Open up here and surrender, boys! We’ve got the place surrounded. No use to think of slipping through. Open up, I say!”



## CHAPTER IV

## A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Complete silence followed this gruff demand from without. Really, not one of the four startled lads could find his voice to make any reply. Even Budge had been awakened; and as a general thing it took something little short of an earthquake to arouse him, once he got asleep.

Bang! bang! bang! came the pounding again.

"Open up here, or we'll punch the door in!" shouted the same heavy voice.

"Oh! my goodness gracious! what is it?" gasped Budge, gripping Jack by the arm, as he groped around in the half darkness.

Alec was moving by now. Perhaps his ready mind began to grasp something of the truth. It was the voice of a white man that made this demand; and he could fancy there was something like authority back of it.

"All right, sir!" he called out. "Just wait till I stir up the fire, please!"

Immediately they heard several exclamations beyond the heavy walls of logs, as though the



words of Alec gave the unseen callers more or less surprise.

"Keep your guns ready, boys! If so be they try to make a run for it, drop 'em like hot cakes!" the gruff voice went on, sternly.

Alec knew just where to pick up a handful of fine tinder. When he had tossed this on the smouldering fire the flames immediately sprang up, so that gradually the interior of the cabin became less dim.

Without the least hesitation the boy hurried over to the door, and adroitly removed the stout cord that was preventing its being opened. Immediately he saw it drawn wide, and a man strode through the opening.

He was a heavy-set fellow, wearing coarse homespun clothes, high boots, and a big hat. Something he was carrying in his right hand glistened in the reviving fire. Alec knew that it must be a pistol; for a year on a cattle ranch had accustomed him to seeing such weapons handled. Still, he did not shrink in the least; for already he had guessed the truth.

The man stopped short, and stared around at what he saw—the four young fellows and the covered bunch of motorcycles in the corner.

"Well, what hev we struck here, boys?" he exclaimed in his booming voice; after which he broke loose in a loud, hoarse laugh that seemed



to shake his whole body. "A pack o' kids, it air, and white uns at that? Git hold of the dawgs, Zeke. We don't wanter hurt these lads. They ain't the reptiles we's a-huntin'."

Three other men flocked inside the old cabin, and one of these had hold of a couple of hounds that looked as though they might be able to do considerable execution, once they got to work.

"I'm the sheriff o' the county, boys," the man in the lead explained, after he had once more looked around him. "This is my posse, yuh see, an' we's out after a couple o' coons that has been terrorizing the hull community this long time past, stealin' whatever they kin lay hands on, and burnin' sev'ral barns that had good terbaccy stored in 'em. Harper's my name."

"Glad to meet you, Sheriff Harper," said Alec, accepting the big hand that was extended frankly, after the man had hastened to return the pistol to his pocket. "My name is Alec Travers. We're from the North, and are on our way down to Asheville on a motorcycle trip. The storm made us hunt for shelter, and that is the way we happen to be here."

"Glad tuh know you, suh," said the sheriff; and Alec was satisfied to get his hand free from his hearty grip before the bones cracked.

Each of the other boys was thereupon introduced in turn; and Alec could not but smile



grimly as he saw the way they turned pale, and winced, after coming in touch with that grip of the officer. Then the posse had to have their turn, and the friendly handshaking continued through until every one had been made acquainted with the rest.

"Don't suppose, now, yuh happen to hev seen airy sign of these black rascals?" inquired the sheriff presently, as he warmed his hands at the blaze.

"Not that we know of, sir," replied Jack. "Of course we've run across lots of negroes during the day, but they all seemed to be peaceable, well disposed men. We did have a visit from what we believed to be a wild dog, that looked like a wolf; but Alec frightened him off with a few shots from his little automatic gun."

"What's that like now?" asked the burly sheriff. "I've been hearing of some of them 'ere tools, but never set eyes on one yet."

Accordingly he had to be shown. And while he eyed the queer little weapon in some curiosity, he shook his head and grinned, as he turned to his wondering posse, saying:

"What would I look like toting a plaything like that, boys? Think I could skeer a bad man when I p'inted my finger at him, and said: 'Hands up'? Reckon they ain't much account fur sheriffs. The bigger the gun the easier



tuh cow the game. I'll sure stick by the old un a while longer."

But it was the wonderful motorcycles that took the eye of those native Virginians. They could appreciate the great value of such novel means for covering territory; though all of them were amazed when Alec declared that such a machine was capable of going some two hundred miles without needing a new supply of gas.

"What does yer tank hold, then?" asked the sheriff, as he bent down and handled the handsome up-to-date Reading that had borne Alec over so great a distance without any serious accident.

"About two gallons and a half," was the reply.

"And how fast cud yuh go on the level?" continued the other.

"Sixty miles an hour in a pinch," Alec went on, smiling at the deep interest of the sheriff; "but of course the road would have to be mighty fine to do that, because it's racing speed. Up hill and down, it makes no difference, they work like a charm."

"I'd like to own one fust rate," sighed the big man; "but I reckons now, they wouldn't be much use in the brush. And that's whar most o' my work hes tuh be kerried on. A hoss kin go where this thing dassent. But I'm glad tuh hev seen 'em. They sure is beauties, boys, an'



I reckons as how yuh enjy good times mounted on 'em. But say, we must be goin' on."

"Do you think those two barn burners might be near here?" asked Budge, who had been anxiously waiting to put this question for some time.

"We was hot on thuh trail when that pesky storm had tuh knock all our calculations criss-cross," said the sheriff. "But p'raps the dawgs kin git a scent agin, if so be we happens tuh strike across the trail. An' we're out tuh finish the business this time or bust, ain't we, boys?"

The posse obediently declared that they were bent on winding up the criminal career of the pair of rascals who had so long been living on the peaceful community, and creating a reign of terror along the border.

They were determined looking fellows, and the boys felt that the two black desperadoes had finally stirred up a hornet's nest when they tempted Sheriff Harper and his posse to take their trail. Like bloodhounds they would hang on now to the bitter end.

Gravely the handshaking was all gone through with again. The boys would have been better pleased to have dispensed with this formality; but they were afraid of offending the gruff but friendly sheriff. Poor Budge winced under the pressure, and nursed his fingers for a long time



afterward, saying they felt as though they had been in a vise.

"So-long, boys; take good care o' yourselves. And if so be yuh happens across them two rascals, give 'em a wide berth. They're all to the bad," sang out the sheriff, as he backed out of the door, through which his men and the two hounds had already preceded him.

"Thank you, sheriff, we will," replied Alec.

"Good-by, sheriff, and good luck to you," called Jack.

"Hope you get your game, sir!" Freckles put in, as the door was pushed shut.

But Budge said not a word. How could he when the tears dimmed his blue eyes, what with the pain in his poor fingers after that gorilla grip? He was whimpering to himself, and rubbing first one hand and then the other sympathetically. If ever fortune allowed them to meet up with that energetic giant again, he would be sure to find some excuse for declining the honor of accepting his hand.

Again Jack fastened the door as before. And once more they sat around the fire for an hour and more, talking over the new adventure that had befallen them. All of them save Budge seemed to think the burly sheriff was a pretty good fellow; but that individual vehemently insisted that he was a pirate, a butcher, and ev-



everything else that was bad he could bring to mind.

"He's got the strength of a gorilla in that hand of his," he declared. "I guess I know now what it feels like to drop into a threshing machine. Never more for little Nelson. My joints'll feel sore for a week, see if they don't."

"Well, we never expect to run up against our friend, the sheriff, after this, so you needn't bother thinking about it," Freckles remarked, yawning widely.

"Turn in again, you fellows. No use of the lot of us spending the whole night sitting up," Jack said, as he started to rearrange his own blanket.

"One thing I think we'd better change our plans in," observed Alec; "and that's about letting the fire go out."

"Just what I was going to say," broke in Budge. "Seems to me this ain't a safe place to be in the dark. What with wild dogs, 'possums, black criminals at large, and sheriff's posses wandering around loose, I want the light."

"Oh! well, we can pick up more wood in the morning, I suppose," agreed Freckles who, truth to tell, was himself not in the least averse to having the cheery fire continue to burn, as they dozed away the balance of this exciting night.



"All right, then," Alec remarked. "Leave that duty to me, fellows. I'm something of a fire crank, you know. I'll keep it burning all we need from now on. If any of you just happen to wake up, and see that it needs fixing, take a hand, will you?"

All of them readily promised, even Budge; though his chums knew very well that if the fire had to depend on his waking up it would be black out long before dawn came around.

Alec managed to lie down in such a position that his face was toward the door of the cabin. Not that he really anticipated there would be any further excitement during the remainder of the night; but somehow, what the sheriff had said about the reckless and desperate nature of the two jail-birds whom the posse was hunting, had impressed itself on his mind in a way that made him a bit nervous.

But even Alec slept at last, for he was tired with the rough riding of the preceding day. Long before this he knew that his three chums were enjoying the soundest kind of sleep. This he could tell from their heavy breathing. Budge had a habit of lying on his back, and when so doing was apt to make a series of queer little snorts and gurgles that would have frightened away any one not accustomed to them.

Freckles had several times played sly tricks



on the fat boy. Once he had even secured one of those patent clothes pins that pinches shut; and this he managed to carefully fasten on the other's nose. Of course Budge awoke when he could no longer breathe properly; and as soon as his wandering hand came in contact with that wooden appendage his shouts aroused the entire camp.

But Freckles himself was far gone now, and paying not the least attention to those gurgles and snorts, which continued right along unmolested.

Alec opened his eyes. He knew he had been asleep, but just how long he could not say; though when he looked at the fire he saw that it had burned pretty well down, and needed attention before he took another nap.

He was just about to rise up with this idea in view when he thought he heard a slight scratching sound. It seemed to come from the direction of the door too; and this significant fact caused a thrill to shoot through the frame of the lad.

Alec turned his eyes in that direction instantly, while his hand crept down to the pocket where he kept his weapon. Ah! it was no delusion after all; there was something moving alongside the door, something that pushed into the cabin by way of the crack between the jamb and the stubborn door.



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Straining his eyes, and taking advantage of a friendly flicker of flame that by some accident chanced to spring into life just then, the boy was enabled to see what that moving, groping object was. It could be nothing more nor less than a black hand; and the glittering object clasped between the set fingers must be a knife, with which the party outside was intending to cut the cords that held the door closed!



## CHAPTER V

## ON THE CAROLINA BORDER

Although startled at what he saw, Alec fortunately enough did not lose his presence of mind a particle. Had it been Budge, now, the chances were he would have been almost paralyzed with horror; and even when he did recover in a degree, the best he could ever have done would have been in the line of a howl.

Quick action was necessary, in order to frustrate the evident design of the one who was back of that dusky hand. Undoubtedly the pair of desperate blacks being hunted by the sheriff's posse had doubled on their tracks; and discovering what a prize awaited their picking inside the old cabin, had determined to hold the four lads up.

Alec sat up suddenly.

At the same time his right hand flew upward, and instantly a sharp report filled the interior of the place with echoing sounds. Nor did he stop there. In the case of the wild dog the continuous bombardment must have had much to do with the animal's fright; and it might be the same here.



Accordingly Alec pressed the trigger of his little automatic twice more. Then he stayed his hand in order to ascertain the result.

The dusky digits had been instantly withdrawn; and he could hear hasty footsteps, as if one or more persons might be running away in alarm.

Then Bedlam broke loose, what with Budge whooping it up, Freckles demanding to know who had taken the club which he had so carefully placed alongside his blanket before going to sleep, and Jack asking questions of Alec.

It took all of five minutes for things to get straightened out, and the story to be told. Meanwhile all of them kept anxious looks on the insecure door, as if half expecting that it would be threatened again.

"Wow! no more sleep for this chicken tonight, fellows!" declared Freckles, with a determined shake of his head.

"I don't fancy any of us can manage to get another wink; unless it's Budge here. It would take more than a dozen scares to keep him awake," Jack observed.

"Well, ain't that a pretty good indication that I've got the real stuff in me, and can show grit?" demanded the party mentioned, promptly.

"I guess about all you've got in you right now is tough 'possum meat," remarked Freckles, with biting sarcasm.



But despite these little pleasantries between friends, it was apparently the universal opinion that it would be folly to think of sleeping any more, while holding the fort in that same old cabin.

"Seems like anything can happen here, fellows," grumbled Budge, who was making the best of it, and lying wrapped in his blanket.

"What time is it anyhow, Alec?" asked Freckles.

The other took out his little nickel watch, and consulted its face by the light of the fire.

"Just seven minutes after three," he announced.

"Oh! so late as that?" remarked Jack. "Why, it will be daylight inside of two hours, or three at the most. We ought to be able to hold out at that, boys."

"Easy thing," chirped Budge; and within ten minutes of the time he made that flippant boast Freckles had to jab him in the ribs in order to coax him to turn over, so as to stop those same old ridiculous gurgling sounds; for Budge was positively sound asleep.

But the others stayed wide awake. Now and then they talked a little, when feeling a bit lonely. The time dragged along; until finally Alec announced that it was five o'clock, and he could see the dawn breaking through the hole in the roof.



It was just as Alec said. When they opened the door, and crept out to hunt for more wood in order to build up the fire, the darkness of night had indeed given way to the coming of day.

After a patient ransacking of all bundles a little food was discovered, not at all sufficient to satisfy the ravenous demands of four hungry lads; but at least it would help to stay their appetites until they could do better.

"Hi! look here where your bullets went through the old door, Alec!" called out Freckles, who was down on his hands and knees investigating.

Of course this brought them all to his side. Alec knew that he had purposely fired low at the time; and the three holes could be plainly seen. Now that interest had been awakened in the matter they even went outside; and a minute later Jack set up a cry, to announce that he had made a discovery

"Alec, you must have winged that fellow," he exclaimed. "See, here are several spots of dried blood on the dead leaves. They couldn't have been there last night, or the rain would have washed them away."

Alec looked at the marks a bit uneasily. While these men were desperadoes, and would have treated them roughly had they been given the



chance, still, he did not much fancy the idea of having wounded one of them.

"But what about the wild dog?" he remonstrated. "I surely hit him once or twice, you know."

"Sure you did," returned Jack; "but it kept on raining after he ran away. If he left a trail behind him it would have been washed out. But you can see no water has fallen on these marks. Ain't that right, now, Alec? You've been with trackers before now, and you know."

"Yes, I guess you've hit it, Jack," replied the other, with a serious look on his face. "But I'm more than glad now I aimed low. I'd hate to think I had shot a human being seriously."

Investigation speedily proved that the creek had gone back into its bed again. It could be forded easily enough, two of the boys at a time carrying over one of the motorcycles.

In this way they finally made a start, and really none of them expressed any regrets at leaving behind that lonely tumble-down cabin where they had met with so many queer adventures. Even Budge, upon being teased by Freckles concerning the merits of that glorious 'possum feast, admitted that things might not on occasion, prove all they were cracked up to be.

Once safely across the creek, and their shoes



having been replaced, the party was ready to take up their forward progress. This business of carrying the motorcycles over streams had already been carried out too many times on this trip for the boy tourists not to have gotten it down to a fine point. Budge generally escaped service, for he was so very clumsy that once he had stumbled, and come near dropping his end into the water. Sooner than have that happen the others were satisfied to scatter his share of the work among them.

The road was by no means improved by the recent downpour of rain; though Budge grumblingly complained that it had been so bad all along that nothing could make it any worse.

Their progress was far from rapid; but then they hoped for better things continually. Youth is ever sanguine, and there is always a rainbow of promise luring enthusiastic ones along the journey.

"We're going to cross over into the Tarheel state when we get to the very next stream, fellows," announced Alec, presently.

"Hurrah! Don't I hope it'll be better going than we've found along these Virginia highways!" said Freckles.

"Listen! I thought I heard a shout ahead!" called Alec.

They chanced to be afoot at the moment.



Budge had fallen behind, and it was principally to wait for his arrival that they stopped at the top of a little rise. He had now joined them, and they had been about to make a fresh start when Alec stopped them with this remark.

"You're right, Alec," said Freckles. "For there's something moving in that scrub down there. It's a man, I tell you, and he's got a rifle. There's another, yes, and a third one. Say, I can see a couple of dogs. Honest now, I believe it must be our old friend, the sheriff, and his posse."

"Gracious!"

Budge said this partly to himself; but when Alec glanced that way presently he was considerably amused to see the other hastily wrapping a handkerchief around his pudgy right hand. Evidently Budge did not mean to give the sheriff another chance at him. Surely the gentleman would not persist in wanting to shake the digits of an injured hand.

A few minutes later and shouts attested that the posse had sighted them. They came up shortly afterward, and the boys were surprised to find that each of the men was mounted on a horse.

When the Virginia sheriff heard what had happened at the old cabin some hours after he and his men had departed, he vented his annoyance



in a way that was possibly characteristic of his profession. At any rate it proved that the sheriff could get off some pretty stiff language when he felt that he had, as he said, been "hocussed by fate."

"We'll git right back thar, boys, and pick up the scent. If so be the kid did really wound one o' the critters, it'll be easy goin'. Ain't got time to even shake hands ag'in, much as I'd like tuh. So-long, all, and thank yuh for puttin' us on the track."

Budge smiled again, and began to unwind his poor hand. He saw the mounted posse ride off along the back trail, the dogs giving tongue occasionally, as though they knew through some instinct that their hour was near at hand.

"Wonder if they'll close in on the rascals now?" said Freckles, as he saw the last rider pass from sight around a bend.

"The sheriff seems to think his dogs can work all right now on a new scent, and after the rain. I happen to know how that is, and I believe he's going to give the two scamps the scare of their lives," Alec remarked.

"Of course they saw us inside that cabin?" Freckles said.

"No reason why they didn't, with all the holes where the old mud had fallen out of the chinks," replied Jack.



"What d'ye think they meant to do to us?" queried Budge; which was a matter he had been pondering over for some time.

"That would be hard to say," Alec answered. "Perhaps they wanted to rob us of any money we might happen to possess. They couldn't use the wheels; but then they might have smashed the same in pure deviltry; or because they feared we might be tempted to put some one on their track in a hurry."

"Ugh! ain't I glad you happened to wake up and give them the grand hurrah, though," Budge went on, drawing a long breath of genuine relief.

"Mount and be off with you, old Stick-in-the-Mud!" cried Freckles.

Accordingly they made another fresh start, with a slight down-grade before them.

"There's some sort of river ahead of us, Alec!" announced Freckles presently.

"Say, if it's too big, and there's no ferry, how do we get across?" demanded Budge, who was keeping pretty well up with the rest as a rule, because he had a secret fear lest he be suddenly set upon by the two hunted blacks, and perhaps kidnapped.

"Make a raft, and carry the machines over," said Jack, promptly.

"But you'll have to swim, or stay on the Vir-



ginia shore, Budge; we can't be bothered dragging you across on a float," Freckles was pleased to say.

"Thanks, but there's a ferry, all right, because I just now got a squint of a rope that goes across the river," Budge announced.

"He's right, fellows, for I saw it myself," Alec called back over his shoulder.

It proved to be the case, much to the relief of Budge; though of course he knew his tall chum was only teasing when he spoke in such a cold-blooded way about abandoning him so cruelly.

The flatboat was on their side of the stream, but though they shouted until tired, nobody appeared to ferry them over.

"It must be a go-as-you-please sort of a jigger," declared Freckles, "everybody for himself. So hop aboard, and stow the wheels away, some of you. We can pull the old boat as well as the next one."

All seemed to go well for a starter; but when they had gotten about the middle of the swift little river there came a sudden sharp snap, and the rope cable parted from the tree to which it had been fastened on the opposite shore, so that the clumsy old flatboat began to swing downstream at a rapid rate, turning around in the current like a chip at the mercy of a flood!



## CHAPTER IV

## A HARD RIVER TO CROSS

"Help!" shouted Budge, as he saw what had happened.

"What d'ye know about that?" cried Freckles, staring aghast at the rope, which was beginning to slip rather speedily through the pulley aboard the flatboat, as the current carried them downstream.

But it was quick-witted Alec who realized the danger to which they were now exposed. If the whole of that rope should pass through the big wooden pulley block it would allow them to go sweeping down in the middle of the swift river, and with unknown perils ahead to give them new thrills.

There was a way to stop it, and Alec lost not a moment in putting himself in touch with the task. They saw him spring hastily forward, and snatch something up from the deck of the boat. It was the rope that had flown partly aboard at the time the strain had broken it.

This he instantly whipped about a convenient cleat. His movements were like lightning; and before even Jack realized what he meant to do



there came a sudden little shock; and the boat instead of continuing to drift straight down the river, began to swing back toward the shore, from which they had so recently started.

"Bully boy!" Jack yelled, as he caught the idea for the first time.

The rope held, for Alec was tugging at it desperately, so that it might not be jerked loose. Jack jumped to his side, and gave him a hand. And in another minute the ferry bumped against the shore.

"Well, here we are, no better off than when we started," laughed Alec.

"Yes, and only for that bright idea of yours, old fellow, we'd like as not be spinning along down stream, turning round in the grip of the flood, and not knowing where we'd ever bring up," Jack remarked, gripping his chum's hand.

Nor was this the first time that he had seen that same intuition of Alec grasp a situation, and fling defeat aside for victory.

"But how're we going to get across?" said Budge, dismally. "It's too deep to do the wading act; and that current wouldn't let us carry the wheels. If somebody could only get over with that rope, perhaps it could be fastened again."

"That's just what, Budge," remarked Jack. "And I'm already picked out for the job, ain't I, Alec?"



"If you want to try it, I'm not going to hinder," replied the other. "But first of all we ought to push the old scow up-stream again."

Some poles were soon found that bore evidences of having been used for this same purpose. While two pulled on the rope, the others bent their backs to the push-poles; and between the several forces the heavy old flat was finally landed back at the original spot.

"Say, why couldn't we use these poles, and get her across?" asked Freckles.

"I'm afraid it's too deep out there to touch bottom," said Alec.

"And besides," Jack added, "even if we did manage to get over, we'd land far below, and have a dickens of a job getting the wheels back to the road again. The best thing for us to do is to carry that rope across, and make a new hitch. Here goes for a try."

He soon had his clothes off. Then taking the end of the rope in his hands he and Alec walked up the bank as far as the line would allow. This was done because Jack knew the swift current would bear him down after he had lost his footing; and he wanted all the allowance possible. If he fell short, he would be carried back to the Virginia shore once more, and nothing gained.



But Jack did not mean to fail. He and Alec studied the river and its currents.

"If you can only get to that rock sticking its nose up yonder, I believe you can make the rifle," said Alec, pointing.

"Just my idea to a dot," the other replied, "and I feel pretty sure I can do it. Here, fasten the rope around under my arms, because I want both hands free when swimming. Now, I'm ready to duck in."

"Luck go with you, old fellow," said Alec.

The two aboard the scow set up a hearty cheer when they saw Jack wading out. He had considerable difficulty in holding up against the current; but being a sturdy lad, managed to brace himself so as to avoid the inevitable as long as possible.

When it became absolutely necessary to give in, Jack took a header, and began to swim with powerful overhand strokes. The cries of his mates encouraged him not a little, though every foot he won had to be fought for savagely, such was the grip of the current at that point.

Now Jack had about reached the vicinity of the partly submerged rock. Everything depended on whether he could make a gallant and successful stand. Alone he might not have been able to hold out long enough to get a fresh grip on his almost exhausted powers; but bracing



himself against the rock he waited until such time as he once more felt in condition to finish the game.

Then he calmly waded ashore, amid the plaudits of Freckles and Budge.

"Bravo! bravo!" cried both of them, clapping their hands.

As soon as Jack had succeeded in fastening the other end of the cable to a tree those aboard the boat set to work again. This time two of them rendered what aid they could by means of the setting poles until the depth of the water rendered these useless. Then they started pulling at the cable.

When in the middle of the rapid little river, at just the place where the accident had occurred before, they almost held their breath in suspense. But apparently the weak part of the rope must have been at just where it passed around the limb of the tree; for it held all right now.

"Oh! I'm glad we got across without a ducking," said Budge, as they came to the landing where Jack awaited them, and his clothes.

"It's too bad about you, Budge," remarked Freckles. "Water and you never did seem to agree. Why, before I was knee high to a cat I could paddle around like a duck; and dive to beat the band."

"Well," answered Budge, good naturedly,



"a fellow can't be everything, you know. Some people are that nervous they can't sleep when there's the least bit of danger around. That state of affairs don't feaze me a bit, you know. That's the difference between us, Freckles—you're the nervous kind; I'm more composed!"

Freckles gave him one look, sniffed the air disdainfully, and retired, worsted in the war of words, as he often found himself. Sarcasm was generally wasted on Budge, and his long-legged chum used to say that his skin was almost as thick as that of a rhinoceros.

After Jack had fully dressed they prepared to start out once more. Alec had employed this time in examining his road map again, for it would be a serious thing if they went many miles out of the way just for lack of caution. Besides they had to always consider the getting of a supply of gasoline, so as to keep a sufficient stock on hand at all times to be sure of a run of sixty or eighty miles.

"And are we now in North Carolina, Alec?" asked Budge, who was coming close behind, as usual, with his motor making no end of nuisance.

"Yes, and I understand that they've got a severe law in this state against the use of a muffler cut-out," said Freckles, severely.

The noise stopped instantly.

"He's yarning, ain't he, Alec? I've heard



of such silly things up North; but in the South they don't care. And besides, there are times when my engine won't work right when I use the muffler. You fellows draw away from me like fun. I'll have to get Jack to give it a good overhauling the first chance we find."

Jack groaned. He had been doing that same thing regularly for Budge ever since they started away from Staunton. The trouble seemed to be that Budge was a bungler, and meddled with things he didn't understand; so that he was continually interfering with the proper working of his motor.

They kept on until noon, with the road nothing to boast of, though fair enough to allow of half way decent time.

Whenever they chanced to pass some little settlement the greatest excitement abounded; for in all probability never before had such a machine as a motorcycle turned up in this locality; and when not only one but four of the powerful little affairs went whirling past the houses and cabins, every soul in the place, and chickens and dogs in the bargain, exhibited the most tremendous excitement.

Such a barking, cackling and screeching as ensued baffled description; and the boys were compelled to laugh heartily every time it happened.



Once Budge by accident ran over a chicken that was bound to run squawking across the road in front of him, instead of staying safe where it was, as silly fowls invariably do at such times.

Fortunately he was not going fast at the time and managed to save himself from a bad tumble by ramming gently into a fence corner, after shutting off power.

The others missed him, and hearing loud cries in the rear, turned back to the rescue. They found Budge in the midst of a circle of gaping and jabbering poor whites, one of whom was holding the decapitated fowl accusingly before him, and evidently giving vent to all manner of dire threats if he did not immediately come up with the price of the bird.

"How much for the chicken, neighbor?" asked Alec, as he dismounted from his wheel and faced the angry crowd of villagers.

They stared hard at the quartet of natty looking speed boys, and the wonderful contraptions which had borne them hither from the haunts of civilization.

"Fifty cents," the man managed to reply, doubtless cunning enough to say double the value of such a bird at this remote point.

"There you are, my friend," said Alec, planking down two silver quarters in the itching palm



of the native, "and since we've bought the fowl, I'll hang it on my saddle here. For who knows, boys, but what we may have to camp out again before we get to the place we are aiming for."

"Say, mister, I've gut harf a dozen I'd let yuh hev et that price," spoke up an old woman.

"An' I cud mebbe spare a few, I reckon!" added a tall, gaunt specimen of a Tarheel native, as he turned his quid over and over reflectively.

But Alec only laughed. He knew that the village where they had intended stopping on the preceding night was only a couple of miles ahead; and that they could expect some sort of feed there.

So they mounted again, after waving good-by to the staring crowd; and amid a whirlwind of popping, vanished down the road. But it would be many a day before their visit was forgotten in that quiet nook of the back country.

Reaching the village they found a country tavern, where a meal was served after a tantalizing wait. No matter if it did not come up to expectations in more than one respect, there was quantity at least; and as Budge remarked when he happened not to have his mouth crammed, "that was what they were looking for just then; quality might do another time; there was a vacuum to be filled after so long a fast; and Nature abhors a vacuum," and much more to



the same effect, all of which the others knew was said just to condone his frightful inroad on the food set before them.

That night they reached a town that was fully ninety miles away from the point where they had crossed the border. They put up at an inn, and, not being too keenly on the lookout for causes of complaint, managed to enjoy their supper.

"Anyhow, fellows," remarked Freckles, as he gnawed away at the razorback ham, "this is sweet, nut-fed ham, if it is tough. And let me tell you, it just beats toasted 'possum all hollow."

"Oh!" exclaimed both Alec and Jack, pretending to hold their hands to their stomachs as though the remembrance was hardly pleasing.

"Oh! please let up on that," gurgled Budge. "It was all wrong. I've been talking about it to the hotel man here, and he says 'possum should never, never be eaten unless baked. So some fine day perhaps we may have the chance to try it again; and flanked by the sweet potatoes or yams. Anyhow, I'm glad we're out of Old Virginia, and that tonight a poor fellow can really get some sleep."

"Sleep!" burst out Freckles, holding his hands up in pretended indignation. "What d'ye know about that, fellows? And he the only one who put in a solid three hours at a clip while the rest



of us stayed awake on guard. But let's go and put our wheels where they'll be safe from meddlers; or we may get stranded right here in this cross-roads settlement, fifty miles from nowhere."



## CHAPTER VII

### A NIGHT AT THE COUNTRY TAVERN

After supper was over the four motorcycle boys sat out on the low porch, where they could talk, and take it easy, until such time as they chose to hunt their beds.

All of them were more or less tired, for it was no joke chasing along those rough and stony roads. Some places they had navigated had proven so terrible that even the best riders thought it good policy to dismount and walk for a stretch. As for Budge, he had lamented his hard luck more times than he could remember.

The balance of the boys knew the stubborn nature of Budge, however, and that the very mention of his giving up would be like waving a red flag in front of a bull. Complain he might, just as an old sailor always does; but prove a turncoat, never! For they had called him Budge just because he always stuck.

"What about our wheels, fellows?" remarked Freckles.

"Jack and I looked after them, all right," Alec answered.



"Then they're safe enough," the other went on; which remark showed the confidence he felt in his chums.

"We had them taken into the room next to the one two of us expect to occupy tonight," Alec went on. "You see this tavern is shy on guest chambers, and there's only one fit to occupy upstairs. We thought Freckles and Budge ought to take that, while the rest of us could bunk down in a little den the landlord showed us. Besides, to be so near our wheels makes my mind easier."

"There's a door between our sleeping room and the place where the motors are stored. Alec made sure to lock the outside door of the big closet; so nobody's likely to get in at 'em," said Jack.

"But what would they want to take our wheels for?" demanded Budge, indignantly.

"They couldn't, in the first place," smiled Jack; "because we've got the whole bunch fastened together with a chain and padlock. But you never can tell what a thief may do when he finds himself balked; and you know we'd be in a nice pickle if he just sliced our tires for us, eh?"

"Well, I should say so," agreed Freckles, "and I give you fellers credit for being so smart."

"Have you got our route laid out for tomorrow, Alec?" asked Budge.



"Pretty well, though it's subject to change, if we strike a bad section. The map-maker hasn't been down in this region lately, and things often turn out different from what they are described," laughed the other.

"Well," grunted the stout youth, "I sure hope that we strike better traveling than we had to-day. I give you my word I'm mighty near done up; and bruised, say, it'd be hard to find an inch of me that don't ache."

"Oh! you'll get used to all that in time, Budge," remarked Freckles, in what was intended to be a consoling tone. "I expect that before we go back to dear old Staunton you'll be as tough as nails. They won't know you when you've dropped about thirty pounds or more."

"That's right, Budge," assented Jack.

"I really suppose you fellows mean well," remarked the other; "but sometimes I wonder if it's worth all this trouble and groaning. But speaking of going back, does anybody have the least idea when that will be?"

"Oh! after Alec has finished his little business in Asheville," Freckles took it upon himself to answer; "and then delivered that packet to Mr. Theodore Warrendale, the gentleman we are to look for somewhere among the Big Smoky Mountains, on the Tennessee border line."



"Ain't it funny now why Alec's guardian never gave him a hint about that important party?" Budge continued, musingly. "Right now none of us know who he is, or what he looks like. All we have to do is to keep right on asking for Theodore till we stack up against him; and then poke out our little packet."

"I don't believe my guardian himself knows who he is," Alec replied, seriously. "There seems to be some queer mixup about the thing. The only point he was sure of was that a clause in my father's will stated that the packet found sealed in his effects he wanted delivered to this Theodore Warrendale before a certain time had expired; and that he would like me to be the one to personally deliver it. No one was to open it under any circumstances, unless three years had passed, and the party could not be found."

"Gee! that sounds thrilling, though!" exclaimed Budge. "And the lot of us have been nearly bursting our think-boxes trying to guess what it all means. I often try to picture in my mind just what Theodore is going to look like. And somehow, at every guess he turns out to be a big strapping mountaineer, that once on a time did your dad a good turn down here when he was buying up property. He's been left something handsome, and your governor just wants you to be the one to hand it over."



Alec smiled but made no reply, though Freckles took up the argument.

"Rats!" he exclaimed, in his vehement way; "stop and look at it, will you? Don't stand to reason that a rawboned mountaineer moonshiner would go by the name of Theodore Warrendale, does it now? I've been thinking that we'll find out this wonderful party is some big crackerjack in the locality around Asheville; perhaps a local judge who was a friend of Mr. Travers long ago. Watch my smoke, and see how near I come to the mark, will you?"

Alec shook his head, and the look on his face was one of perplexity.

"I don't know, fellows," he said. "I'm just as much up in the air as any of you; for I never heard the name before in all my life that I can remember. But there are times when something seems to tell me I'm in for a big surprise when I come face to face with this gentleman."

"You must have some reason for thinking so, Alec?" put in Jack.

"Yes, I have," replied the other. "You know my father was suddenly stricken with paralysis before he died. He tried terribly to tell me something at the last, but was utterly unable. I've never forgotten the look on his face. And, boys, when I get to thinking about it, somehow



I seem to just feel inwardly that what he wanted to speak about has some connection with the little packet I'm carrying right now."

The others saw that Alec was nearly overcome by emotion, as he recalled the tragic time he had lost his father; and Jack quickly changed the conversation, to give his chum a chance to recover.

There was plenty to talk about, for each day brought its many little adventures. What had happened when crossing the border river afforded an abundance of opportunities for humorous comment; and presently Freckles and Budge were deep in an argument as to where they would have possibly brought up, had Alec failed to seize upon the broken cable, and stay their drifting progress downstream.

One thing led to another, and presently Budge happened to remember the chicken he had run over, which was purchased for half a dollar.

"Here, what about that fowl I bagged today?" he demanded, suddenly.

"Listen to him brag, would you?" laughed his tormentor. "To hear him talk you'd think he was the greatest Nimrod that ever came over the pike. Sounded just like he said: 'Trot out that last lion I knocked over, and let the varlets see what a mighty man they have for a riding chum!' "



"Well, didn't I kill the bird, tell me that?" demanded Budge, aggressively.

"It never squawked after you bowled over it with your three hundred pounds of heft, that's dead sure," returned Freckles, promptly. "If it had been a cow the result would have been just the same, I calculate, once you got your steam roller working."

"Well, it won't keep forever, will it, Jack? Ain't we going to dine off it? I'd just like to say for once the whole bunch had feasted off game that fell to my gun," the perpetrator of the foul deed went on.

"Game?" snorted Freckles. "An innocent, trusting Biddy, weak in the upper story, and not knowing your machine was loaded for bear, tries to flutter across the road, when you come slam bang up against her, and she is no more. Besides, I felt of her, and I give you my word, boys, that hen was pretty near her dotage. Tough is no name for it. We tried Budge once on the 'possum stunt; are we going to risk our lives a second time just to make him happy?"

"The landlord has promised to hand it out in the shape of a stew for breakfast. So just hold your horses," Jack interposed.

"Bully! and it's nearly ten o'clock right now, so we won't have so very long to wait!" exclaimed Budge.



His enthusiasm must have soon waned, for in less than ten minutes from that time Freckles discovered that he was sound asleep in his chair. As the balance also felt tired, and in need of rest, it was decided to separate. Budge was badgered until he could be partly aroused, and led away upstairs by Freckles; while the other pair retired to the little room on the ground floor.

Alec passed into the big closet adjoining, and soon came out again unreeling a small coil of insulated electric bell wire. This he attached to a buzzer which he placed near his side of the bed, while Jack, who understood the racket, only smiled and nodded.

What Alec called a "closet" was in reality a small room, used for storage. Place had been found for the four motorcycles, which, as has been mentioned before, were fastened together with a chain and lock.

This storeroom had a window and a door. The latter Alec had locked; but he was suspicious of the window; for though he used a stick to brace the sash, one of the panes was broken, and a hand could easily reach in to remove the protection.

The two lads soon tumbled into bed; and relying on his automatic sentinel to warn him of any peril hanging over their precious wheels, Alec wasted no time in worrying about their safety.



At some time during the night he was aroused by what sounded like a locust rattling away to beat the band. And as he and Jack sat up in bed they realized in a twinkling that after all the safeguard had not been set up in vain; for surely some intruder must be forcing a way into the little storeroom where the motorcycles were parked.



## CHAPTER VIII

## THE WORM TURNS

As though propelled by springs both Alec and Jack bounded out of bed. The former had made all preparations for this exciting moment, even though he had hardly expected that it would come about. And consequently his groping hand instantly seized upon a match, which he struck.

His next act was to apply the flame to the little lamp taken from his wheel; and the carbide of which had been allowed to come in contact with sufficient water to insure a certain amount of gas, should he want it in a hurry.

The light was of course not half as brilliant as it would otherwise have been; but it answered all the purposes of Alec; who snatched the lamp up and hurried over to the connecting door.

To turn back the bolt that secured this, and fling the door wide open was but the work of a second. Then he flashed his light beyond, and with Jack close at his elbow, pushed across the sill.

They were just in time to see a dusky figure



that had been crouching near the floor make a flying leap for the window. The intended thief had crawled in, after raising the lower sash; but in his extreme haste to go out he carried the whole affair with him.

“Whoop!” shouted Jack, in more or less excitement, when there came a tremendous jingling of broken glass, and the thud of the landing body.

Alec hastened to the gaping opening, and thrust his lamp out. The man was just scrambling to his feet, and Alec caught one glimpse of a badly frightened face turned toward him. Then the fellow took madly to his heels, and made off.

Of course the greatest excitement followed. Everybody about the building was awakened by the racket, and voices called out to know what had happened. Some appeared to think it must be an earthquake; and Freckles was heard trying to calm Budge, who had fallen out of bed in the sudden alarm, and thought the house was afire, with no hope of a rescue.

Then came the landlord, hastily clad, to make inquiries. Alec and Jack had in the meantime slipped on some clothes, knowing that they would be expected to explain. And besides, they considered it best to move the wheels into their room for the balance of the night; since



they were too valuable to take the chances of some furious vandal wrecking them in spite.

"Who's sick?" asked the proprietor, after knocking at the door.

"We don't know his name," answered Jack, humorously; "but he looked like he was suffering from a headache as he galloped down the road, after smashing through your window. Come in and see what happened, landlord."

Great was the surprise and indignation of the owner when he learned what had taken place. With true Southern spirit he chose to take it as a personal reflection on his honesty, that guests under his humble roof should have been in danger of being robbed.

"If I only knowed who the wretch was, I'd fix him," he kept on saying. "Ye say as how he was a white man, and not black."

"Yes, that's true, but I never saw him before," Alec replied; "and I'd hardly like to turn suspicion on any one by trying to describe him. Better let it go at that, landlord. No damage has been done to our machines; you're the only loser through that broken window."

"That's true," said the gaunt North Carolina inn-keeper, with a shake of the head; "but I've got a reputation among the people of this section. I'd hate mighty tarnal much for 'em to think Honest Si Corey kept a inn whar travel-



ers wa'n't safe. I'm gwine tuh keep my eye peeled for a gent that has cuts on his head; for I surely do reckon, suh, as how that party couldn't break through yonder without doing of himself some damage. And if I find him, it's going to be a sorry day foh that white trash, I give yuh my word."

"Say, Alec, did they get 'em?" called a tremulous voice from above; and looking up the boys saw Budge and Freckles hanging out of a couple of windows, eagerly drinking in every word that was being said.

"Not at all, Budge," laughed Jack. "Go back to bed, and get rested up for another hard day's work tomorrow. We're going to take the machines in with us. They're all right, give you my word for it. Ta! ta! now."

By degrees the excitement quieted down, and those belonging in the neighborhood, who had come out to ascertain what had happened, one by one went back home. After Alec, with Jack's help, had pushed the four motorcycles through the connecting door into their sleeping chamber, giving the boys little room for moving around, the two of them once more sought their bed.

And the balance of the night passed quietly, without another alarm. Whether the landlord discovered who the would-be thief was or not,



the motorcycle boys, never learned; for they left the place after a hearty breakfast, in which Budge's "game" played a prominent part, and never saw it again.

As usual Budge was yawning and stretching when he dropped down among the balance of the group on the porch, where they awaited the bell that would summon them to the feast.

"Well," he expostulated, when Freckles took him to task for his tardiness, "guess you'd be in no hurry either, if you'd been kept awake all night like I was. It wasn't enough that I had to be thrown out of bed when you jumped up so sudden like; but how can a poor fellow sleep when he's lying alongside a big frog from the bazoo swamps? All night long he keeps up that noise, fellows; you don't wonder it gets on my nerves, and keeps me awake, do you?"

Freckles opened his mouth, then closed it again. He almost had his breath taken away by the very audacity of the thing. Budge had actually stolen his thunder; since the shoe was really on the other foot, and it was Budge who calmly slept on, while his lengthy chum squirmed, and tossed, and punched the fat boy in the ribs, with entreaties to turn over and quit trying to arouse the dead with his snores.

He hardly knew what to make of Budge nowadays. Surely the worm was turning; and it



was no longer safe to play jokes on the good-natured one. He had learned how to get back at his tormentor on occasion.

The "chicken stew," as the landlord called the fricassee, proved to be quite tasty and it was laughable to see how Budge fairly beamed with pride as he asked each member of the quartet in turn if he would not like a second helping.

It had been brought in on a large platter, and placed in front of Budge, by the directions of Jack.

"Oh! don't be bashful, now, fellows," the host kept on saying, as he turned first to one and then another. "Plenty left here yet. When I go after game, you see, I always pick out a nice big fat one, that will go around. Who's going to have some more? Don't all speak at once, now. Well, if none of you want any, I'm blessed if I'm going to see such a prize wasted." And he cleaned off the platter handsomely.

"That was a great stunt you played last night, Alec," remarked Freckles, who for a wonder, seemed to be letting Budge severely alone for the time being.

"Do you mean about the buzzer that woke us up?" laughed the other. "Oh! nothing very wonderful about that. Simplest thing ever. But it worked like a charm, let me tell you, boys."



"I can vouch for that," declared Jack. "The first shock sent me up in bed just like I'd had a dose of electricity. It's a queer sensation to be jerked out of a sound sleep so sudden. I was dreaming something funny too, and thought the car had run off the track. But I'm wondering if that poor wretch has a bad headache this morning. Oh! boys, if you could only have seen him hit that window and fall out, carrying the whole business with him. It was just great!"

Freckles groaned.

"Just my luck to miss the peaches and cream," he said. "Now, I'd have given a heap to have seen that show. But I had my hands full as it was; for Budge was so badly rattled by that crash he fairly rolled out of bed, and set up a holler that he didn't do it. He won't confess what he was dreaming about; but I know it must have been something funny. Hey! Budge, if you've licked that platter clean let's get a move on. Alec and Jack are off, and it's time we started."

The morning seemed to promise a good day, and according to Alec's programme they might expect to halve the distance separating them from Asheville before another night descended.

As the roads had dried by this time they found the going somewhat better than on the preceding day, though the hills were harder to



climb. Poor Budge, being so clumsy, and timorous at the same time, frequently found it necessary to dismount and walk, afraid to take chances of navigating his machine between the numerous stones that cropped out in the road.

This of course held them back considerably; but as they were in no particular hurry complaints failed to follow. And besides, Budge always had the most wonderful excuse ready to account for his delay. Once, for instance, he had seen a big snake, and felt an irresistible desire to slay the monster; only it scuttled into its hole before he could find a club.

"That wise old serpent knew what he was up against," sneered Freckles when he heard this thrilling tale. "He knew mighty well that he hadn't the ghost of a show when he had caught the eagle eye of the great hunter and backstop foul catcher of the team. But why didn't you run over him, Budge? Nothing like that method of getting your game, when everything else fails."

Budge did not condescend to explain; but he had carried his point; for the others had waited for him at the little bridge over the creek.

At noon they managed to get something to eat at a cabin where some colored people lived alongside the road. True, it was limited to



corn pone and milk; but as there was an ample supply placed before them, the boys were satisfied, and paid the small reckoning with satisfaction; after which they sped on once more.



## CHAPTER IX

## AN EXCITING INTRODUCTION TO ASHEVILLE

"Where do we hold over tonight?" asked Budge, about three that afternoon, as the four chums loitered along the road, admiring the wild scenery.

"As we've only got another short shift to Asheville, we'd better stay in a town where we can be sure of decent beds, and something good to eat," suggested Jack.

"Just what I thought, fellows," returned Alec, cheerfully. "Suppose we take a rest here for a breathing spell, as I notice Budge is puffing after that last hill climb, when Old Hurricane got too frisky to be held in, and had to be led by hand."

"That suits me all right," retorted Budge, not a particle abashed by the charge.

So a halt was called, and as the others clustered around Alec, he took out his well-thumbed map, and explained just what course he was following.

Since motorcycles need at least a fairly decent road in order to make progress, in such a state as



North Carolina, it often becomes necessary to make wide detours so that wretched thoroughfares can be avoided. Thus it may be the motorist covers fifty miles of plugging, in order to advance ten as the crow flies.

"If I had to do it over again," said Alec, "I'm sure I could make a better go of the job. I've found out lots of blunders that might be avoided. Still, here we are, not more than fifty miles from Asheville; and I believe the roads get better from now on; plenty of hills but smoother surfaces."

"Is this the town where we stay tonight?" demanded Budge. "Wonder if they are up to the times? D'ye know, I'm sort of getting rusty, fellows? I'd like to visit a motion picture show for a change, and see life again."

Of course that was an invitation for Freckles to laugh scornfully.

"Why, what d'ye know about that, boys?" he exclaimed. "When all of us believed our friend Budge was having the most exciting time of his whole career on this adventurous trip. Think of what we've been through—that storm chase; the old cabin by the roadside; the coming of the wild dog; the finding of that 'possum; the pounding on the door by the sheriff; the visit from the black fugitives; the breaking of the ferry cable; the great kill Budge made on the road, which we enjoyed for our breakfast;



and last but not least, the attempt of some one to steal our wheels. And yet he says it's been awful dull! Goodness gracious! what a greedy thing it is; and how can we satisfy Budge?"

"By finding him a chance to look at some pictures showing how apples are raised over in Oregon; or the millions of fierce animals we swallow with every sup of water. Those are the things that make his blood boil. The rest of us are too slow for Budge, it seems," laughed Jack.

After awhile they made a new start, and inside of an hour had arrived at the town mentioned. Hardly had they passed into the limits of the place before Budge gave vent to a whoop of delight.

"There she is, fellows!" he cried; "over yonder at the corner! See the placards handing out the dope for tonight. They're up to snuff, these people are. And all the wonders of the universe for the small sum of ten cents. Me for the picture show, after I've had my grub tonight."

"Oh! well, the rest of us might as well tag along, to see that you know how to behave properly," said Freckles.

"Yes," grinned the other, "I've heard that old story often, how the wise dad takes his boy to the circus; it's one word for the boy, and ten



for the old man. But I guess there'll be plenty of room for us all. The more the merrier. And just see what a treat we're up against, would you? Tragedy, comedy, instruction and pathos—you pays your money and you takes your choice; as the peddler said, who was selling photos of Roosevelt, Bryan, and several others, and they all turned out to be the same picture. Oh; ain't I glad here's where we get off."

None of the quartette seemed sorry, for while they had not made any astonishing distance during the day's run, it was always a strain upon the muscles sitting so long, and eternally dodging obstacles that cropped up along the road.

This hotel seemed to promise better accommodations than any they had struck for some little time, and Budge was correspondingly happy.

"First of all let's make sure the wheels are secured against trouble," suggested Freckles; "and then we can turn our attention to such small things as filling up with grub; and catering to that yearning for information that can only be satisfied by a visit to the ten cent show."

The supper was all that they anticipated, and more. A variety of dishes were placed before them; and finally, when Budge was asked to remove a cover from one that he was expected to serve, a shout went up from his chums.



"Old friends with new faces, Budge!" exclaimed Jack.

"The ghosts of the past rise up to confront him!" said Alec.

"Yes, Budge, remember what you did with his first cousin!" Freckles went on.

"Why, it's sure a 'possum, fellows!" Budge managed to gasp, staring at the object on the platter, flanked by an array of sweet potatoes.

"And a nice tender young one, too," remarked the landlord, who of course failed to understand what all the wild laughter meant.

But Budge was game.

"All right, you fellows," he remarked, sturdily, "if you don't want any, just say so, and that means I'll have it all to myself. Yum! yum! tell me that don't smell sweet, though! Anybody feel like tasting it? Don't all speak at once now."

But he found that, despite their merriment, his comrades were every one of them ready to make a second try at the famous Southern dish. And this time, as everything was favorable, they decided that it had made quite a hit with them.

Afterwards they lounged around until the picture show was open, and then marched in with other curious people. The small theatre was crowded, and after all, the boys found con-



siderable enjoyment in the films. At least it was a break in the monotony of their travels.

"I sure hope we won't be nearly frightened to death tonight with a fire or something like that!" remarked Budge, as they were on their way back to the hotel.

"All right," Freckles said immediately, "then see to it that you lie on your side; for I've got my clothes-pin along, and I've taken a mighty vow to use it if necessary. You'll land on the floor quicker than you did last night if you keep me awake; hear that, now?"

Budge looked at the others and winked, for they were now inside the taproom of the hotel.

"That's an old trick of the trade, fellows, don't you know?" he said, coolly. "When a thief runs away through the streets he shouts at the top of his voice, 'Stop, thief!' and in that way diverts suspicion. Freckles knows the game all right; but he doesn't deceive such wide-awake boys as you, not for a minute."

There was no alarm that night. Whether Freckles himself slept too soundly to be annoyed by any sounds that Budge may have made; or the latter, taking warning, managed to sleep on his side instead of his back, no one ever knew.

Morning found them on deck, and eager to cover the remaining distance that separated them from Asheville.



"Wouldn't be surprised to meet up with rain today," said Jack, as they looked the motor-cycles over as customary before leaving port; a sufficient amount of gasoline having been purchased to fill each tank.

"Oh! I hope you are a bad prophet, Jack!" observed Alec.

"Yes," Budge put in; "we ought to have a chance to make Asheville first. Don't mind how long we have to be marooned there. Plenty to do to keep dull care away."

They got off with a good start, feeling fresh, and ready for the last stage of the journey to the famous North Carolina health resort among the mountains.

As time went on it was seen that Jack was a poor weather prophet; for the clouds passed away, and the sun shone as brilliantly as it ever could do in this wonderful Land of the Sky, where the atmosphere is so pure and full of tonic, that sick people from all over go there to draw in new life.

The roads were much better too, and as they had made a somewhat early start it was hardly noon when they found themselves approaching Asheville itself.

The trip had been thus far a success. They had covered a good many hundreds of miles since leaving home, without a single serious accident,



even to Budge, the poorest rider of the lot. From now on until they chose to set out on the return, following a different route, they might take things easy.

"Dear me!" sighed Budge, as they entered upon the streets of the mountain city; "seems to me things are getting awful humdrum like. Here all last night and today not a single thing has happened to stir a fellow's stagnant blood. I don't know what's going to become of me if this thing keeps up. I'll pine away, or go to sleep for a week!"

"Poor chap!" said Freckles; "what can we do for his ailment? He wants excitement now as a steady diet. Thank goodness! they have the picture fever here, and we can feed him on that. Or, perhaps, when they know Budge has come to town, they might be accommodating enough to get things moving. There, listen to that, hardly have we arrived before we hear a shriek, and the lovely heroine is calling out to Budge to come and save her from the villains."

Freckles was of course joking when he said this; for although they did hear loud voices, together with a scream or two, the houses beyond prevented them from seeing what it was all about.

"Say, perhaps there is something going on around there!" remarked Jack, as he cocked up



his head to listen; for shouts of "Whoa! whoa!" and "Stop him, somebody! the girl'll be killed! Head him off!" came to his ears.

"It's a runaway, that's what!" burst out Budge.

"Then get ready to play your part, Budge," said Freckles. "Jump for the bridle, you know, and hold on like a good fellow. When he feels your heft he'll stop, all right, if he knows what's good for him. Look! there he comes around that corner, under full steam. Oh! thunder, there is a girl in that rig, sure as you live!"



## CHAPTER X

## A LUCKY MEETING

"Head him off!"

"Somebody stop him, quick!"

"Wave your arms, and yell like thunder!"

All sorts of foolish advice was being shouted by the crowd that surged after the runaway; but nobody appeared to know just what ought to be done. The horse was a powerful looking beast, and had apparently been frightened by some simple little thing; then came the wild shouts that simply made the animal go frantic.

A small girl was seated in the rig. She had hold of the lines, and was doing her best to saw at the mouth of the horse; but her strength availed little against his fear. She was as white as a sheet, too, nor could any one blame her for feeling that way. It was a situation that would have sorely tried the courage of a big man, let alone a chit of a girl.

Jack saw Alec jump from his wheel, lowering it hastily to the street. Luckily at the time they were moving along one side of the thoroughfare, rather than keeping to the center.



He immediately followed suit, under the impression that possibly his chum might have need of assistance in the bold act he contemplated.

Of the four friends Alec was of course peculiarly fitted for the job of stopping a runaway horse. He had learned many things during that eventful year on a western cattle ranch; and was as much at home in the saddle as any cowboy could be.

Besides, Alec was built for a runner; possibly not as much of a sprinter as the tall and angular Freckles; but a stayer in a race, and a splendid finisher.

There was only one way in which the horse could now be stopped. His fright had so completely taken possession of him that any attempt to suddenly turn him aside would result in an overturned vehicle, and possibly death to the girl.

Alec started running, not toward the horse, but in the same direction as the crazed animal was going. Of course he could hardly expect to keep his distance ahead of the beast, nor was that his intention. The horse began to overtake him, Alec holding in something of his best efforts for the crisis.

When the proper instant came he made his jump.

"Oh! look! look! Alec has grabbed him by the bridle!" cried Budge, quivering all over with nervous tension.



“And don’t he just hold on like fun though?” exclaimed Freckles. “What d’ye know about that, now? See him pulling the silly beast down! Talk to me about the Old Man of the Sea hanging on Sindbad’s shoulders, he couldn’t hold a candle to our pard for sticking. There, he’s got him stopped! And the girl’s jumped out of the rig too. Look at her hugging Alec, would you? Oh! my, Budge, what a grand opportunity you lost that time.”

The boys pushed their motorcycles along, Jack taking that of Alec in charge, until they came to where the crowd was clustered. Fifty people were talking at once. Some congratulated the hero of the occasion. Other brave men explained just how they had intended doing that same little trick, but unfortunately could not get in ahead of the runaway.

Alec did not seem to be hurt; at least he was smiling, and trying to hand over the horse to some men, so that he might break away.

This he succeeded in doing; and having taken his wheel from Jack, was about to head toward the hotel at which they expected to stop, when the girl who had been in the vehicle came hastening back, leading a gentleman, evidently her father, judging from the alarmed expression of his face.

“Here he is, father,” she cried, pointing to the



embarrassed Alec. "He ran and caught Billy by the bridle, and just hung on till he conquered him. I tried to thank him, but I just couldn't hardly say a word, I was so frightened."

"Wait a minute; please, my boy," said the gentleman, his voice quivering with emotion. "You wouldn't deprive me of the pleasure of shaking hands with you, I hope, and adding my thanks to those of my only child? My lad, if you have a mother or a father, they have cause to be proud of such a son. You must come home with us, and at least take dinner with the little girl you saved from possible death."

Budge gave Freckles a nudge at that.

"Hear! hear!" he whispered in the ear of his tall mate.

Alec had turned very red under all this praise; for the crowd still surrounded them, and scores of eyes were fixed upon him.

"Oh! you are giving me too much credit, sir, I'm sure," he expostulated, "you see, I spent some time on a cattle ranch, and it was the easiest thing in the world to stop Billy. He seemed to understand when I spoke to him, and just held on. My weight did the rest."

"But please do not refuse to come home with us. I must see something more of you. Bring your friends along with you. We shall be only too glad to have you all with us. And the girl's



mother would never forgive me if she wasn't allowed a chance to meet you. My name is Embree, Judge Madison Embree, and we live in the house with a cupola that you can see over yonder."

"Oh! how strange!" exclaimed Alec, turning toward Jack, and with a look of wonder stamped on his face.

"In what way, my boy?" asked the gentleman. "Have you heard the name before?"

"Why, sir, I have come down here on purpose to meet you. I am Alec Travers!" said the boy, eagerly.

"What! a son of my old friend, Travers, whose death shocked us all? Of course I expected to see you some day, for it would be necessary in connection with those important land deals I was in correspondence with your guardian about. But just to think of the strange way you've introduced yourself—by saving my only child from a terrible death! Give me your hand again, Alec; and God bless you!"

"And we'll be only too glad to go home with you, Judge Embree," the boy went on. "Because the sooner these matters are closed up, the better. I have another mission down here, and perhaps you can help me in that too."

"You can count on me to any extent, Alec," replied the judge, earnestly. "But I must tell



you in the beginning that we are comparatively new people here, having come just three winters ago, for my wife's health. Your father used to be down here even before you were born; in fact, he made an annual pilgrimage to North Carolina every fall after quail; for he was an ardent sportsman, as of course you know."

The three boys fell in after them as they walked toward the house with the cupola; and the girl explained to her father just what started the runaway. She had been introduced to Alec as Gypsy, so that he did not know her real name.

Of course Freckles found plenty of opportunities to poke fun at poor Budge because he had lost an opening for a grand heroic deed that would have written his name on the pages of history. On his part Budge did not seem to be lamenting the fact very much; to tell the actual truth, he was much more concerned in trying to guess what they were likely to have for dinner; and secretly expressed the hope, for the sake of his chums, that it might not be that delightful Southern dish, "'possum and sweets."

"Not that I wouldn't enjoy meeting our old friend again, fellows, believe me," he declared, solemnly; "but I seem to know that the dish is rather palling on your jaded appetites, and for the sake of variety, if nothing else, let's hope it'll be something different—roast beef or lamb for a change."



It was always a difficult task to lift Budge's thoughts above the level of the ordinary things of life; comfort, and the gratification of his healthy appetite cut a great figure with him.

They left the motorcycles temporarily in the barn, where the man promised to keep an eye out for them. Being introduced to a fine bathroom the boys certainly enjoyed a clean wash-up. As usual they joked about their recent experiences, comparing this last haven, for instance, with the one they had found the night of the storm, when that abandoned old cabin seemed a very hotbed of strange happenings for them.

They found the judge's wife and Gypsy's mother a very charming lady. She looked in poor health; but declared that she was building up constantly in that bracing climate.

And once more Alec had to listen to thanks, even Gypsy joining in, now that she seemed to have found her voice again. It added to the pleasure of the couple to know that the one to whom they felt they owed such a heavy debt was no stranger after all, but the son of a dear old friend.

Afterwards they sat outdoors during most of the afternoon, chatting on scores of subjects. The boys were coaxed to tell much of the past, and especially concerning the various events



that had happened to them as a club organization.

Alec learned quite a few things about his father that he had really never known before; and they were of a nature to make him feel more proud than ever because he was a Travers. Judge Embree even admitted that only for the help and encouragement of Mr. Travers, who had been much older than himself, he might have given up all hopes of succeeding in the law.

But when Alec asked him plainly if he knew of a gentleman by the name of Theodore Warrendale, with whom his father might have had some sort of dealings in the past, and who was to be found somewhere in the Smoky Mountains west of Asheville, the judge after thinking seriously declared he had never even heard the name.

The boys considered this strange, since he must know most people of any consequence within a radius of many miles.

"If you contemplate going into the Smoky Mountains, Alec," the judge continued, looking thoughtful, and a bit uneasy, "you must be very careful; because you know they are said to be the haunt of the most desperate and lawless moonshiners in all Tennessee and Carolina. Revenue officers seldom venture there save in force. A stranger is apt to be treated to a sud-



den shot; and he may consider himself lucky if he only loses an ear or a finger before clearing out. I wouldn't go unless it is absolutely necessary."

Freckles felt Budge shaking like a leaf as he heard this; but all the same he knew that if the rest went the boy with the stubborn mind would refuse to be left behind.



## CHAPTER XI

## THE MOONSHINER SENTINEL

Judge Embree would not hear of their going to one of the hotels. He had plenty of room in his house, he declared, and would be delighted to have the motor boys stop with him just as long as they could remain over.

As Alec really had business of importance to transact with the judge, and Miss Gypsy added her entreaties, he left it with the rest. Of course the question was soon settled. After that first dinner Budge simply declined to budge; and privately confided to Freckles that he would not care if the couple of days Alec spoke about, extended to a week or two.

They certainly enjoyed the time, every minute of it. The judge had a big heart, and nothing could be too good for these fine, manly young fellows; especially after the great service one of their number had done him; and he the son of the man whose helping hand had assisted the lawyer reach his present high position.

The two days went all too soon for Budge; and when Alec finally announced that his legal busi-



ness had been completed, so that nothing now remained in the way of their continuing the trip as planned, the face of the other went down fifty degrees.

"But then, Budge," said Alec, quickly, "you don't have to go along if you'd rather stay here. Gypsy has agreed to look after you; and we promise faithfully to drop in to pick you up before we start north again. Make up your mind—is it to be ease and comfort here; or all sorts of unknown troubles with us?"

Budge looked first at the laughing young girl; then his blue eyes ranged along the line of his three mates. He seemed to be deciding a weighty matter in that slow brain of his, after his customary ponderous way.

Never had those three faces appealed more to him than right now. He remembered the glorious times they four had had in common in the past. Even the badgering of Freckles assumed a different aspect when mellowed by time and distance. Could he let them go off into possible danger, while he loafed around at his ease? Perish the thought!

"Don't mention it again, boys," he said, positively.

"Then you stay?" asked Freckles, with a trace of disappointment in his voice; for whatever would he do with Budge missing?



"I go wherever you go! What d'ye take me for, a renegade, to turn on my chums? I may have my faults, and plenty of 'em; but they don't run in that line. Count on me to the bitter end!" and as he spoke Budge thrust one hand in the bosom of his coat and assumed a dramatic attitude that made him look quite heroic.

"Bravo! Good! Fine! Bully for you, Budge; you're the candy!" came in a volley from the three listeners; and Freckles smiled again.

Even Gypsy Embree clapped her little hands in admiration. Budge may have amused her after a fashion by his peculiar ways; but she was now beginning to see that underneath it all he was true blue, and would never go back on his friends.

And so it came about that one fine morning the motorcycles were brought forth from the barn to where they could be thoroughly overhauled; and for an hour or so the quartette of riders busied themselves.

Budge bustled around as though he were taking an active part in the work; but truth to tell his ignorance in connection with all sorts of machinery was absolutely complete, so that Jack preferred not to have him "monkey" with anything. So Budge could play the errand boy, and assist where a second hand was needed.

They had consented to stay to dinner, and



then make a start. The Big Smokies could be seen in the distance, and it would take them a very short time to get there; though just how Alec was to find the gentleman for whom he was to look puzzled even the judge.

Evidently they must trust somewhat to luck. Perhaps, once in the region, they might be able to pick up a clue somehow; and once that had been done success was only a matter of time.

About two o'clock then Alec gave the signal for the start. They had all shaken hands with the judge, his good wife, and Gypsy. Moreover, the promise had been given to the effect that on their homeward course they would positively drop in again on the Embrees. To make this a certainty the artful Gypsy had persuaded her father, the judge, to postpone the finishing touches on some of those legal documents he was preparing for Alec; so that the latter would be compelled to return to sign the same before witnesses.

"Remember, you have promised to be very careful, all of you, and not get in any more trouble than you can help!" warned the little miss, shaking her finger particularly at poor Budge; who reddened, perhaps with a sense of guilt, since he realized that his mistakes so often brought him into difficulties.

Then Alec led off, and in another minute the



string of popping motorcycles went spinning down the street, making merry music. A few boys who had gathered to see the start set up a cheer; a dog barked furiously, and ran after the whirling wheels; and Alec, looking back, answered the waving kerchief of Gypsy; since somehow he seemed to know it was especially for him.

As long as the road remained good they kept up this spanking pace; but soon the leader found that the same old difficulties had begun to crop up. He called out a warning, and reduced his pace; so that presently they were almost crawling along—that is, it would seem so in view of the pace the motorcycles were capable of putting up under different conditions.

Up and down hill they pursued their way, all the while gradually drawing nearer to the ridge which had such a sinister reputation as the abiding place of those bold and reckless spirits who persisted in making moonshine whisky, despite the raids of the revenue officers.

Crossing a valley they finally found themselves about to enter among the uplifts that had so long been beckoning to them. Cabins had not been plentiful for the last three miles or so. And whenever they chanced to meet a gaunt looking native, he stood and stared in speechless amazement at the sight of four motorcycles in a line, heading straight toward the ridge of mystery.



Alec had his own ideas about these things. He believed that some of these men who dwelt on the outskirts of the mountains must certainly be in league with the moonshiners, and possibly acted as agents, through whom the illegal liquor was disposed of.

If this were so, then they would doubtless view this astonishing advance on the part of the boys with the gravest suspicion. In their minds it could stand for only one thing, and that an organized raid.

This was why Alec always turned in his saddle after passing one of these tall, raw-boned North Carolina "crackers," to watch and see what his actions might be.

And on the third occasion he was not much surprised to see the man start on a full run for his cabin near by, as though spurred by a sense of duty.

"That fellow is going to send up some kind of a signal, boys!" Alec called over his shoulder; for the others were close by in a clump; and for a wonder Budge's machine had the muffler in use, thanks to Freckles' complaints that he wanted to do a little high thinking.

"Signal!" burst forth Budge. "Goodness! do the hotels up here have runners out, to let them know guests are coming? And will they feed us on 'possum, do you think, Alec?"



Budge said this so innocently that the rest broke out into a shout.

"Hear him, will you?" cried Freckles, as soon as he could command his voice. "He thinks this place is another Asheville, and a fashionable resort. The hotels we'll be apt to strike after now, Budge, will be mud-chinked cabins; and the grub consist of corn bread, and perhaps a slice of bacon."

"But what would he signal for, then?" continued the other, determined to know.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Freckles; "have you forgotten what the judge told us about the people over here in the Big Smokies—how lots and lots of 'em make moonshine stuff; and are always looking out for a raid from the revenue officers."

"Gee! and will they take me for a bold revenue agent?" gasped Budge, who was having the time of his life trying to dodge the stones with which the road was beset, and at the same time avoid a collision with one of his mates' wheels.

"Sure, they'll think you must be the Grand Mogul of the whole bunch," replied his tormentor quickly. "And these sharp-eyed chaps can cop a distinguished air the first thing. You see that's the penalty you have to pay for bearing the trademark of importance about you. If you were more humble looking, like me, for in-



stance, you'd avoid being a shining light for a volley!"

"Drop that, Freckles," said Jack. "What's the use fooling him? We may run up against enough trouble without imagining any."

"But Alec said that cracker would signal," Budge resumed; "and, bless me, if I can see any telegraph wire around here."

"Huh! mebbe he doesn't need any," grunted Freckles.

"Oh! then he will wigwag, like the Boy Scouts have learned to do; or perhaps use a looking-glass, to flash the sunlight, and heliograph," Budge remarked, in a satisfied tone.

"Well, I hardly think these moonshiners are up to that sort of stuff," said the one in the lead. "You know out in Africa the natives use a drum to send news, and they say the sound passes along over hundreds of miles in a mighty short time. These mountaineers have a way of their own; and Budge, Jack, Freckles, all of you drop off your wheels right here; for I want you to see what I mean."

They had hardly done this than Budge, on turning his head eagerly, gave vent to a loud cry of astonishment.

"Why," said he, "smoke is going up in several places, black pinewood smoke!"



“Count the columns,” observed Alec, grimly, “and you will find that they are four—just the same number as our little bunch!”



## CHAPTER XII

## THE HUMBLE CABIN OF GABE

Jack and Alec exchanged glances.

"I don't just like the looks of that," remarked the former.

"Perhaps we made a mistake in coming on our motorcycles," Alec returned. "From the way that old fellow gaped, I imagine he believes they must be some new Gatling gun that the Government forces mean to set going against his friends up in the mountains. We might have tried quieter means to get in touch with our man."

"Shall we turn back now?" asked Jack.

"Rats!" exclaimed Freckles. "A nice lot we'd look like, turning tail at the sight of smoke. Perhaps that don't stand for anything after all. I'm for going on."

"Sure we must," echoed Budge, showing a surprising amount of bravery. "Think I'd stand the laugh in them bright eyes, if we only charged up the hill, and down again. Let's continue our journey; though honest now, I wish Freckles hadn't said so much about corn pone and bacon; the only two things that I don't like."



"Oh! in that case just save up your fine appetite until we strike the Hotel Embree again," laughed Freckles.

"Well, when our chums are so decided on going, I guess it wouldn't look nice for the balance of the crowd to show the white feather," observed Alec.

"Then it's forward we go?" asked Freckles.

"Yes, we might as well mount again," the leader remarked, suiting the action to the word.

As he and Jack managed to keep fairly well together they found plenty of opportunities for exchanging confidences. When it came down to a pinch Alec always relied more on Jack than either of the others. Freckles was brilliant at times; but generally far from reliant; while Budge found it slow work to get ideas through his brain, so he was of very little use when emergencies arose that required rapid thinking.

"What's the program?" asked Jack.

"With all my cudgeling of my brains I've been hardly able to lay out anything half way decent," the other replied. "Seems to me the only thing we can do is to speak to every one we meet, and ask if they happen to know Mr. Theodore Warrendale. In that way we may run across a clue. Seems to me that if he is a man of any importance in these districts, either as a moonshiner or a merchant, somebody must be able to direct us to his home."



"That sounds reasonable, anyhow, Alec. And of course we can always tell just what we're down here for. The news will spread, you know; and perhaps, after all, these fellows will come to look on us as harmless joy-riders."

"I'm sure I hope so," replied the other, earnestly.

"Why, yes, it would be rather nasty to be fired at from the bushes up on the mountainside, just as if we were wanted in their game bags. But Alec, honest now, you don't believe they'd take us for revenue agents? They can see with one eye that we're just boys, out on a frolic."

"That's plain enough," replied the leader. "But you understand these men have been hunted so long that they're always suspicious of every stranger. The judge says he wouldn't dare venture into these mountains alone. Before he'd gone half a mile the chances are he'd hear a bullet zip past his head, and a voice commanding him to turn around, and clear out. They take no chances."

"But the fact that we are only boys—" went on Jack.

"Well, perhaps those smart agents of the Government have played all sorts of sly tricks on these men in the past," Alec explained, voicing the secret fear that had come to him; "and they may suspect that we're being put forward as a



sort of 'stall,' to pick up information for the revenues."

"And I haven't forgotten what the judge told us about the fate of informers, who have tried to betray these mountaineers," Jack said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Under the circumstances we can't get busy any too soon, spreading the news that we only want to find Mr. Warrendale; and have no idea of prying into any of the secret still business of the natives."

"Here's our first chance, then," remarked Alec, as in turning a bend of the winding road, now hardly more than a broad trail, they sighted the usual low log cabin, its chinks filled in with hard mud, and possessing a chimney made of flat stones, that was built up against the rear wall.

Several barefooted and dirty-faced children were playing in front of the door, where a batch of pigs wallowed, and some half-starved chickens scratched.

The sound of the approaching motorcycles had already reached the ears of the ragged and unkempt youngsters, for they were standing in attitudes that expressed both wonder and alarm.

Immediately a panic seized upon every living thing as the boys bore down on the cabin. The chickens flew for shelter, squawking loudly; the pigs whiffed, took one startled look at the



frightful engines that were bearing down upon them, and then "scooted," as Budge expressed it, for the fence corner; while the three children fled shrieking into the cabin.

Immediately a tall, slatternly looking woman made her appearance, gripping in her hands one of those long-barreled guns so seldom seen nowadays. And from her determined looks Alec felt sure that she not only knew how to use the weapon, but was quite ready to do so if necessary.

He threw up his hands in token of amity, and jumped from his wheel, the others copying his example. At first it looked as though the woman might be tempted to shoot, for she half raised the gun to her shoulder. Then, as she possibly saw that they were all boys, and perhaps somewhat dazed by the sight of the four splendid motorcycles, she lowered it again.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," said Alec, as he laid his wheel against the rail fence, and slowly approached the door of the lonely cabin. "Do you happen to know a party by the name of Theodore Warrendale anywhere about here? I've got an important paper to hand over to him; and if you could only tell me where he lives I'd like to pay you for the information."

"What kinder paper—summons?" the woman jerked out, with a scowl; possibly that was the



only sort of document with which she was familiar.

"Oh! no, not at all," said Alec, smiling in a friendly way. "It is a document of some kind, probably of value to Mr. Warrendale, that my father, who is dead, wished given to him, and by me particularly."

"Huh!" grunted the woman, suspiciously eyeing the boy while she continued to fill the open doorway of the cabin with her spare frame, as though defying him to enter there, and make any sort of search for illegal goods. "Yuh be frum the No'th?"

"Yes, we have come many hundreds of miles on our motorcycles, partly for the fun of the trip, and also to carry out the wishes of my father. I had some business with Judge Embree in Asheville. He told us it would be dangerous coming into the Big Smokies; but I felt sure that when the people here knew we were only boys, and that all we wanted was to find Theodore Warrendale, they would not bother us."

She had started at mention of the judge's name. Too late Alec realized that he had made a bad move in uttering it. To these mountaineers a judge must always stand for the law, and that was what they were continually at war with.

She shook her head, and the suspicious look



returned to her eyes, which were small but piercing.

"Naw, don't know anybudy like thet," she said, coldly. "An', bub, if yuh takes my 'vice ye'll turn 'roun' right peart, an' get outen these hyah mountings as fast as yuh kin run. 'Taint safe foh strangers 'bout these diggin's."

"Thank you, ma'am," Alec replied, although he felt a little queer because of what he knew must be back of her words. "But we mean no harm, and are not here in the nature of spies, or anything of the sort. If we could only run across the party we want to find, we'd be only too glad to go back to Asheville."

"What mout be yuh name, bub?" the woman asked, curiously.

"Alec Travers," he replied.

"Huh! Travers, yuh sez? Pears tuh me I knowed a gent long time ago by thet name. An' sho! p'r'aps now, yuh mout be his boy," she declared, showing more interest.

"I'm sure it must have been my father," Alec cried, eagerly; "for he used to come down here every year to hunt. He invested in considerable property here later on; and it was in connection with that I had to see Judge Embree, who has had it in charge."

"Huh! an' my ole man uster be his guide. Shore, he'll be glad tuh hear it w'en he kums



hum. He's out in ther mountings right now. But all ther same, bub, if yuh knows wat's good fur yuh, jest turn 'round, an' cut outen this. No matter wat yer bizness might be, they ain't gut no use foh strangers in ther Big Smokies."

She said this with a slight show of animation, as though taking a little interest in him because of the past.

"But it doesn't seem to stand to reason that big, husky men would try to harm a party of boys," remonstrated Alec. "They surely wouldn't shoot without first warning us; and if I can only get to talk with any of them, it's all I ask."

"Times has be'n porely with weuns," she went on, showing a flash of emotion; "an' they's ben lots o' trubble afoot. Right now theys mad as hornets a-cause a leetle while back theh was a raid, an' foh men was snatched outen these hyah mountings. Theys waitin' trial, an' as they was took with the goods on, makin' mash, it's gwine tuh be a matter o' ten yeahs foh Bob an' Likins. I warns yuh, turn back afore it gits too late."

Of course the others could not but hear every word of this conversation. Budge was shaking so that he had to lean up against the tree near which he happened to be standing at the time. But no one was watching him; for they found plenty to occupy their attention in the scene



that was taking place at the cabin door, where the slatternly woman stood, gun in hand, with the dirty-faced urchins peeping out from behind her skirts, and staring their hardest at the wonderful motorcycles.

But Alec only shut his teeth together. He was not accustomed to being frightened off when bent on attending to his own business. Perhaps he and his three chums showed a spice of boyish recklessness in doing what they did; but they had never as yet run up against a North Carolina moonshiner, and consequently could not believe one-quarter they had heard.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he went on; "but it seems as if I ought to keep on a little further, trying to find this Mr. Theodore Warrendale, after coming so very far. I'd like to meet up with your man first-rate. If he used to be my father's guide in the old days, I'd be glad to shake his hand. And perhaps he might let me do something to make your life here a little happier—just in memory of my father, you know."

The woman stared hard at him as though she found it difficult to understand just what he could mean. Then she drew a long sigh, and shook her head.

"Yuh caint do anything fuh us, suh," she said, sadly. "Weuns was bawn hyah, an' we spect tuh die right nigh this. It's allers ben ther same."



My ole man's name is Gabe Torrey. Yuh may a heard o' him in Asheville."

"No, but I'm sure I've heard my father speak of him," said Alec, eagerly. "And when we come back this way I'm going to stop and see Gabe, if so be he happens to be at home."

She shook her head wearily.

"Yuh see, suh, Gabe, he don't show up hyah in thuh daytime, 'cause theys a warrant out ag'in him, an' a reward on his head. But shore I'll tell him, if so be he kims outen the moun-tings soon. He'd be right glad tuh meet yuh. But I'd shore like tuh hev yuh turn back. I'd hate tuh know anything 'd happened tuh yuh."

Alec took out some silver he happened to have loose, and said:

"Please let me give a little present to each one of your children, Mrs. Torrey." But she half raised the gun, and looked daggers at him, answering instantly:

"Don't yuh dare offer it, suh! Right now who knows but what theys hostile eyes on yuh; and if they seen me a-takin' money, they'd burn this cabin over my head, a-thinkin' I'd sold out tuh the revenues. Git along now. I's sed enuff, I reckon."

"Well," said Alec, resolutely; "I'm determined that before I go North again you and Gabe have just got to accept a present from me, in my



father's name. I'll find some way of getting it to you without exciting the suspicions of your neighbors. Good-by then, Mrs. Torrey, and I'm awful glad I met you. Don't forget to tell Gabe, and have him wait around for us when we come out."

"I on'y hopes as how yuh does kum out," said the woman with the forlorn face; and somehow the words caused a cold chill to strike into the heart of Jack, usually the bravest of the lot.

And then the motorcycle boys jumped on their machines and were off.



## CHAPTER XIII

## THE MOUNTAINS WITH THE EVIL NAME

"Wait up, Jack, there's Budge's regular call for help!" said Alec, before they had passed over half a mile.

Jack looked at him queerly, as he put on brakes and came to a stop, dropping off his motorcycle gracefully.

"I'm some suspicious of Budge," he remarked, drily, as they turned around and started to walk back over the short distance separating them from the stalled couple; for it would hardly pay to ride.

"I think I get what you mean," smiled Alec. "Budge must have heard all that was said by that woman. I couldn't see his face, but I can imagine about how it looked."

"Yes, he was badly rattled, I give you my word," Jack went on, hurriedly, for they were now approaching the one under discussion, who with Freckles at his side, bent down as though examining his machine, and apparently fretting dreadfully because of the delay.

"Still he spoke up, and was for going right along," commented Alec.



"That was to save his face, you know," Jack observed. "Budge is naturally timid. He feels things that none of the rest of us do. And I warrant you he's made a little mess of his carbureter or something else right now, just to delay things, so we can talk it over again. Delay may bring about a change of our minds, you see."

"Well, Budge is up to such tricks, I'm afraid," Alec mused. "And yet perhaps it might be a good thing all around for us to talk matters over some. I'm sure I don't want to drag my chums into anything, unwillingly. We will go over the ground again while you doctor up his machine."

"But majority must rule," said Jack, quickly. "You know we offered to leave our comrade at the Embrees, and he declined flatly. He mustn't be allowed to upset all our plans at this late hour. If he really wants to back down, being attacked with cold feet, he can get out, and wait for us in Asheville. Perhaps Freckles might want to go along too."

"But you, Jack?"

"I'm sticking closer than a mustard plaster," smiled the other. "You can't just get rid of me, try as hard as you please. Where you go, there I go; your danger must be my danger; and your reward shared with me."

Alec made no verbal reply; he simply could



not, on account of the choking feeling in his throat. But he stretched out a hand, and seizing the digits of his chum, pressed them earnestly.

Words were not needed at a time like that, when actions spoke louder than thunder tones.

"What's all this trouble about, Budge?" demanded Jack, as he rested his "Rocket" against a tree, and joined the stooping pair.

"Oh!" said Freckles, speaking for his mate; "something gone wrong with that blessed old grip control again. Budge is afraid of it, and says he don't want to take a header into one of these blooming gullies we're meeting up with. And I don't seem able to get it to work."

"Just my hard luck," grunted Budge, disconsolately. "When things look like they wanted to go along smooth like, some new leak has got to spring loose on me. Why should I get the only defective machine in the crowd? Tough luck, fellows."

"Perhaps you'd better have changed your mind, and stayed in Asheville," remarked Jack, quietly, as he got down to examine things.

Budge turned a bit white, and then red. Possibly he imagined Jack already suspected that he had done something on purpose to delay them.

"Not much I would, even if I had to walk after you," he said, fiercely. "That grip control is wabbly, Jack, and treacherous. Every time we



come to a gully I just feel the old thing heading that way. I believe it's got the temper of a broncho, and just wants to dump me over."

Jack did not reply, though he smiled as he set to work. He knew that Budge had just as perfect a machine in the start as any of them; and that much of his petty troubles had sprung from his everlasting bungling when he imagined something could be improved. In this way he had loosened many bolts and nuts, and it was extremely difficult to adjust them again as nicely as they had been in the beginning.

As to the machine trying to drag him into trouble, that was easily explained. It was the strange fascination that seemed to draw Budge directly toward the very spot he should avoid; if it happened to be a stone in the road, while he meant to give it a wide berth, some horrible tendency seemed to make him head straight toward the obstacle, and possibly just graze it in passing.

Jack knew that this tendency always existed with a timid rider. He had felt it himself far back, when first starting to master a wheel. So of course he took no stock in Budge's complaint about the wicked nature of his bucking "Old Hurricane."

Five minutes later and Jack announced that he had mastered the little trouble.



"Don't meddle with it any more, Budge," he said. "The next time we stop over a night I'll fix the thing so it just can't give you any more trouble."

"Huh! the only way to do that is to empty his tool bag," chuckled Freckles, who, according to his way of remarking was "on to" his chum's weakness.

"Well, I just can't get a start when we're going up-grade like this," remarked Budge, calmly, as though he had just made that discovery. "So you see I'll have to keep along on foot till we get to the top. You fellows go along, and wait up for me."

"Oh! there's no hurry," said Jack. "We might just as well all walk up here, while we're about it, and talk over matters at the same time."

Budge gave an audible sigh of relief; and Alec, who caught the sound, positively believed the fat boy had attained his desire. Whether he feared something might be hiding in the bushes along the hillside; or simply wanted to give his chums a chance to cool down, at any rate his end had been accomplished.

As they walked they entered into a discussion of the case. No one seemed able to propose any better plan than the one they were following, though Alec begged them to be frank.



Budge did offer a suggestion that perhaps they could leave the mysterious packet with some one to be given to Mr. Warrendale; but Alec promptly put a veto on any such procedure.

"In the first place, Budge," he said, positively; "you forget that it was my father's desire that I should see this party face to face, and stand by while he opened and read the contents of this packet; though for the life of me I can't imagine why. So you see I am bound to keep up the hunt, even if the rest of you should desert me."

"We'd never do that, Alec, bet your sweet life," exclaimed Freckles, indignantly.

"Don't you believe it, Alec; we've just got to stick together through thick and thin," Budge burst forth with.

"Then again," the other went on, as though determined to rub it in while about it, "please show me the party we could trust it with. Up to now we haven't run across a blessed soul that ever heard the name of Theodore Warrendale; let alone knows him. Even the judge said he didn't; and that woman who has lived around this section of the country all her life, couldn't tell."

Budge nodded his head, and seemed to be taking a fresh grip on himself; for they were now close to the top of that elevation; so that in another minute or so it would be necessary to make



a new start forward, plunging deeper into the unknown dangers that lurked in those lonesome valleys and hills.

"Sure, we've just got to do it," he said, as he allowed a look of grim determination to creep over his plump face. "I'll promise to do the very best I know how, boys; but if Old Hurricane bucks me into a hole, please promise to get my mortal remains out for decent burial, won't you?"

"Rats! just make up your mind you ain't going to give way like that!" laughed Freckles. "I don't like the way things look any better than you do. Seems to me I c'n glimpse a moonshiner holdin' a long gun, and squattin' behind every blessed bush on the side of the mountain, ready to pot us, but after we get closer I always find out that it's only a shadow. Buck up, old fellow; and now, we're off!"

They made the start without the least difficulty. On the level or with a decline before him, clumsy Budge could always get a flying start without any accident; but he invariably balked at a rise, and found some excuse for walking it, if off his motorcycle at the time.

No doubt what Freckles had confessed with regard to what his own thoughts and fears were, had more or less influence on poor Budge. Certain it was that from that moment on he seemed



to pay more attention to the wild aspect presented by the bleak mountainside than to where he was going.

While descending the grade on that wretched mountain road, he came near having an upset several times, because of his wobbling; but finally they reached the bottom, where a rude bridge with a frail handrail, carried the road across a stream.

Jack and Alec had already thundered over the wooden planks of the bridge, and Freckles had fallen back; for he saw that Budge needed all the room possible under the circumstances, so as to avoid a collision.

Budge had aimed badly when trying to avoid a stone that lay in the road just before he passed out upon the bridge. This brought him very close to the right side; and naturally he gave a quick movement of his hands in order to keep away from that railing.

Freckles let out a shout of warning, and that seemed to complete the demoralization of the clumsy rider. The next thing they knew there was a crash as his heavy motorcycle struck the handrail. Budge was hurled forward, the very violence of his plunge serving to throw his machine back to the roadway of the bridge; but the unlucky rider catapulted over the side, "for all the world like a jumping frog," as Freckles declared afterwards.



## CHAPTER XIV

## MORE AND MORE TROUBLE

"Alec! Jack! quick! he's gone and done it!" whooped Freckles, himself almost taking a header, in his haste to come to a sudden halt.

There was really no need to tell the advanced riders, for they had only gone some ten yards beyond the bridge when that terrific smash reached their ears; and knowing Budge of old, they could instinctively guess what had happened.

Immediately stopping, they gained their feet, and hardly taking time to lay the machines on the ground, both started wildly back, their faces white with horror.

Freckles was already at the side of the bridge where the rail had given way, down on his hands and knees, and peering eagerly over the edge. The others, as they came leaping toward the spot, fully expected to hear him utter lamentations, and see him wringing his hands in sore dismay. Judge of their delight when instead, Freckles broke out into a shout that seemed to be tinged with laughter.

"Hurrah! he's all right, Budge is, and swim-



ming to beat the band! Tell me he can't keep himself afloat, will you? Dropped into a nice deep pool too, as neat as you please. Keep it up, Budge; you're all right—you're a jim dandy sport! Oh! just look at him splash, would you? Hi! there, we're coming down to pull you out! Keep going like a windmill, Budge, arms and legs moving all the time."

As soon as the others reached the edge of the bank they saw that what Freckles had so graphically described after his queer way was actually true. Budge was in the water, and making a terrific splashing, as though he really believed himself in danger of being drowned. Fear will often cause a novice to actually swim, in spite of his ignorance of the first principles of the art—that is Nature taking care of her own.

To scramble down the bank was the work of a moment. By that time Budge was standing up, and the water only came a little above his waist. Apparently then his swimming feat had been pretty much a matter of imagination; but he had gone through with the whole program, just as if it were absolutely necessary in order to save his life.

He presently came walking out of the creek, looking like a "dripping mermaid" as Freckles declared; but ready to join in the laugh which the others could not help from setting up.

Here was a new dilemma. Budge was soaked



through to the skin; and while the air was not at all cool, still he ought to be dried out for the sake of his comfort, if nothing else.

"We'll stop over a bit right here, and make a fire where Budge can dry himself," remarked Alec, decisively. "While we're about it we can be on the lookout to see if anybody comes along the road; and hail them."

The fire part of the plan was easily managed, and in front of this Budge hung his dripping garments, while he himself kept close to the blaze, turning around constantly when one side of his figure became uncomfortably warm.

It took half an hour, and the work of the entire squad, to get him in decent condition again; during which period poor Budge was fairly bombarded with good advice as to what his actions should be the next time he came to a bridge.

"Anyhow, fellows, give me credit for one thing," he said, as a bright thought struck him. "Perhaps you didn't notice just how I kicked Old Hurricane in the ribs when he threw me. That was the only thing that kept him from chasing after me into the creek. Say, I'd have sure had the headache if he bumped down on top of me."

As none of them could say whether his action had been a mere accident, or a really bright flash of intuition, they made no comment on his remark.



Of course Budge had to walk the next rise again; but it was only a short one; when they came to a gloomy looking defile, where the road ran between the outcropping hills, looming up on either side in a forbidding fashion.

If matters had looked serious before, they certainly took on an appalling aspect now, as the four boys started slowly into this glen, where the sunlight was barred all admittance.

"Look ahead, Alec," said Jack, suddenly; "there's a cabin—two of 'em!"

"Let's jump off here then, and ask a few questions," replied the other, quickly.

"Do you see anybody around?" asked Jack.

"To tell the truth I don't," answered his chum; "but perhaps we can start up a woman or child. Isn't that a faint trace of some smoke rising from that chimney, Jack?"

"Well now, it looks like it; yes, you're right, Alec. I guess after all we'll have a little luck here."

But he was mistaken.

They made a halt, and Alec, stepping up to the nearest open door, knocked, without receiving any reply. Again he beat a summons on the door, while Jack, stepping over to the second cabin, followed his example.

"Shucks! don't seem as there's anybody home!" grunted Freckles, evidently surprised at the stagnation that seemed to exist.



"Go in and see what you can find out, Jack!" called Alec. himself suiting the action to his words.

Three minutes later they both came out again, shaking their heads in the negative.

"Not a single soul around here," remarked Jack.

"Ditto," Alec went on; "but there's really a fire smouldering on the hearth. They must have been home within a few hours."

"Just what I found," Jack echoed. "What d'ye suppose sent them off, children and all; for I found lots to tell me there were youngsters here?"

His chum looked very serious.

"I'm afraid there can be only one answer to that question," he said.

"You mean the smoke signals?" Freckles demanded.

"Just that. They warned the people here strangers were coming; and that meant danger to them. Why the women and children should hide I don't just understand; but they must have reason to fear a raid of some kind. Perhaps they may have had a hand in resisting the revenue men the last time they were here; and are afraid that they may be arrested, and taken to the county seat as witnesses."

"But this is a tough thing we're up against,



Alec," Jack went on. "If we just can't come face to face with any of the people in these Big Smoky Mountains, how d'ye suppose you're ever going to find out about Theodore?"

"One thing I'm going to do," said the other, resolutely; "and that is write a few lines, and fasten them on the door of this cabin. I want the mountaineers to know that we are not their enemies—that we want to be friendly, and not pry into any of their secrets."

"I hope it will work," said Jack, as he saw his chum star' to write something; but from the tone of his voice it was evident that he did not share any sanguine ideas with Alec.

"There, if any of them can read, they'll know from that we are not the dangerous lot they seem to think. I've made it just as simple as I could, you see, in the hope that they may understand, and turn in to help us."

The rest of the boys gathered to read what he had written, after Alec had fastened the envelope to the door. It was part of a letter that had come to him in his home town, and bore his address on the other side.

He had printed the communication in plain capitals, knowing that these would be more readily read than anything else. This was what they read:

"We are four boys from the North. We have



a valuable message for Theodore Warrendale. If you know him, get word to us, and we will pay you ten dollars. We want to be your friends and we have nothing to do with the revenue men.

“ALEC TRAVERS.”

“Now sign your names after mine, every fellow,” said Alec, holding out his pencil to Budge, who chanced to be nearest.

After that had been done they once more mounted and proceeded onward. Instead of getting better the route seemed to grow even more gloomy. Budge kept glancing to the right and to the left as he guided his noisy machine along, dodging stones, and roots that cropped up in the trail, and having plenty of thrilling, narrow escapes from collisions with near-by trees.

“Oh! I’m sure I saw a man dodge behind that tree up yonder!” he suddenly exclaimed, to Freckles who was close behind him, in momentary fear of an upset; for if Budge went he was pretty sure to mingle in the calamity.

“Go on; don’t try to stop here, silly!” cried out the lanky one, in sudden alarm lest Budge would go sprawling across the path, wheel and all.

“But I tell you it was somebody; and he had a gun too, for I saw it!” Budge persisted in saying, with his usual stubbornness.

“All right,” answered the other, quickly.



"Lots of people in this region have. That's none of our business, so long as he lets us alone. Strike up a tune as we go along, fellows. They ain't apt to think a jolly lot of boys could mean any crooked business. Let's sing 'Dixie,' just to show 'em we are true blue!"

It wasn't a bad idea after all, as Jack thought when he heard the suggestion; for to tell the truth the more serious and concerned they looked the greater chances of the hidden mountaineers believing they were spies, sent out to discover their secret stills.

But unfortunately the idea came to Freckles a little too late to have it tried. Before Jack or Alec could even venture any comment there was heard a sudden shot, coming from behind them, and in the very section where Budge had so persistently declared he had seen the flitting figure.

"Put on speed, and come along, everybody!" cried Alec.

Budge and Freckles of course tried to obey the order; but the latter, as might have been expected, blundered, so that he immediately ran into a tree; and Freckles was thrown as well.



## CHAPTER XV

## ALEC TAKES CHANCES

Of course the old story was repeated when Budge brought Freckles to the ground. The latter was not hurt by his tumble, but immediately set up a bawl for the others to hold up. And hearing this familiar sound, as well as the crash, Alec and Jack brought their machines to a quick halt.

They started back to join their comrades, not at all easy in their minds. For as that shot had presumably been fired at them, it seemed possible that one of the others might have been hit.

Before they had covered half of the distance, however, they were greatly relieved to discover the two boys hastily dragging their heavy machines in among some bushes that happened to grow rankly alongside the road.

"Get under cover, Alec, Jack!" called Freckles.

Thinking that perhaps it might after all be the wisest thing to do, the runners jumped to one side, and continued their advance in a more cautious manner. In this way they came upon Budge and Freckles.



These worthies were crouched down in the bushes, and apparently greatly excited, as was only to be expected after their stirring upset.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Alec, still a little anxious lest the bullet might have wounded one of his chums.

"Nothing but a bump on my head, where I butted into that old tree," grumbled Budge, just as grieved as though it had been wholly the fault of the said tree in persisting to grow just where he wanted to drop off his wheel in a hurry.

"I barked my shin when I went down," grunted Freckles, rubbing the lame ankle while speaking; "but I reckon she don't count much. Might a-been a bad job though. Ketch me following so close on his heels after this. I've had my lesson at last, I tell you, fellows. Knuckle down a little bit more, Alec; the measly old moonshiner might see you, and take another nasty pot-shot at you."

"Then neither of you were hit by a bullet?" asked Jack.

"I wasn't; and I reckon Budge will say the same," replied the tall lad, promptly.

"Did you hear a bullet sing past?" Alec pursued.

"Well, now," Freckles drawled, "I wouldn't like to say for sure I did; but seeing that this is new business to me p'r'aps I just don't know the whine of lead when I do hear it."



"How about you, Budge?" continued the other.

"Nixey, nothing doing," he answered, promptly. "That crack of a gun gave me such a spell of shakes that I wouldn't have known it if a bushel of bullets spun past, so long as none of 'em banged into me."

"Well, I had an idea that way," Alec went on. "You see, it just happened that I was turning to look back at the very second that gun sounded. I saw the smoke puff out too, up on the mountainside. Then a queer thing happened. A figure came reeling into view, and I saw the fellow drop his gun like a hot cake. After that I lost sight of him; and shouted to you to come on."

"But look here, Alec," said Jack, who was quicker than either of the others to grasp what their leader hinted at; "d'ye mean to say you don't think the shot was fired at us at all?"

"Have we anything to prove it?" demanded Alec. "Nobody was hit; and neither of these boys can say positively he heard the bullet hum past. Show me a hole in the ground, or in a tree, to mark where the bullet went! You can't do it. And somehow, fellows, there was that in the action of the man I saw, to make me believe he may have had an accident!"

"Glory! shot himself, you mean, Alec?" burst



out Budge, who possessed a very sympathetic heart.

"That's just what has struck me; though it may prove a humbug," Alec answered, sturdily.

"Say, then we ought to go back there, and see if we can help the poor critter," declared Budge.

"Not the lot of us," Alec instantly remarked, with that vein of authority in his voice that Budge knew only too well. "I'm going to look into it myself; and meanwhile do the rest of you get these machines further along to where Jack and I left ours. Wait there for me."

Jack gave him an appealing look; he wanted to accompany his chum; but Alec was of the opinion that one could do better than a couple, and hence he shook his head in the negative whereupon Jack's face took on an expression of disappointment.

"I hope neither of the cycles are broken by the tumble," remarked Alec, as the owners started to pick them up.

"Nothing serious, I reckon," said Freckles cheerfully, as he moved his wheel a few feet. "But a few more of the same sort, and there won't be much left of my poor old Cannonball Limited. But though she limps a bit, like the boss, I guess she's all there yet in the running."

"Mine seems to work," Budge went on; "though I bet something's loose again—that



grip control, perhaps; or the carbureter out of business; perhaps the rotten old magneto's gone back on me. Jack will fix me up, though; Jack is the boy who knows how to doctor a sick motor."

"Well, he can be looking it over while I'm away. Just stop in the bushes where we left our wheels. I'll get back as soon as I can."

As he spoke Alec left them. He did not step boldly out in the road, but on the contrary seemed desirous of keeping concealed as much as possible; for he dodged back among the trees.

Here was a chance for the boy to show that he had not forgotten all he had learned when out West on that cattle ranch with the cowboys. They had taught him a multitude of things during that time, for Alec was a willing student in all that had any connection with life in the open.

Among other things he knew how to slip along from tree to tree without exposing himself to any extent to the observation of a possible enemy. And this knowledge he put into good play as he gradually advanced toward the spot where he had seen the puff of smoke burst forth; and had a glimpse of that strange thing in connection with a staggering figure.

By degrees he worked up from the road until he was above the point which he had under observation. Now and then he would halt for a minute, as he carefully looked to see if there was



anything moving. But failing to discover such he would once more creep along.

There were times when the going was not so easy, for the side of the mountain proved to be steep and rocky, with treacherous slides, unless one uses great care in placing his feet.

Once he started a stone rolling down, and to his excited fancy it made a tremendous amount of noise; though likely enough his fears exaggerated the same. After that he crouched low for almost two minutes, wondering whether the racket would cause the unknown to expose himself.

When, however, nothing happened, and he saw no moving object save a crow that passed cawing overhead, Alec again started to advance.

He was now very close to the spot, as he remembered it. Yes, surely that clump must be the bushes behind which the fleeting figure had disappeared at the time he looked back, and just after the shot was fired.

Just then Alec pricked up his ears to listen again. He believed that he had heard a strange sound that was not unlike a groan.

Could his suspicion then, be true, and had the unknown injured himself in some way? That surely was a voice muttering low words, and interspersed with groans, as though the unseen party might be in pain.

Still, it might be a trap! Alec did not forget



that these mountaineers were as a rule a crafty set, and ready to play tricks on the unwary.

So restraining his impatience he continued to softly creep along, drawing close to the clump of bushes with every movement.

Finally he took a lead that brought him so near that when he carefully raised his head he could see behind the bushes.

Yes, he had not been mistaken then, for there was a figure in plain sight. Why, it was no man after all, but a boy, no taller than himself, gaunt looking, and dressed in faded jeans. He was sitting on a shelf of rock. His jacket had been thrown aside, and the sleeve of his ragged cotton shirt rolled up, so that he could clumsily wind a rag, evidently torn from the aforesaid garment, around his arm.

Blood could be seen below the rag, proving that he had been injured more or less severely. Even as Alec looked, crouching there, the boy made an impatient movement, as though becoming angry at his own want of skill in binding up a wound.

There was no evidence of a trick about that scene, Alec decided on the spur of the moment; and immediately his mind was made up. He would join the other, and try to gain his goodwill by assisting him.

“Let me help you, please!”



At the words the backwoods boy started half to his feet, and stared at the approaching figure of the Northern lad. He even allowed the rag to drop, exposing quite a nasty little wound, which looked as though a bullet might have cut into the arm in speeding past.

Alec pushed forward now, without the slightest show of hesitation. There was upon his frank, manly face only the earnest desire to be of some assistance; for surely such a wound required prompt attention, which the other did not seem able to give by himself.

So they came face to face, the boy who all his life had known the best of love and tender care, together with all luxuries that money could secure; and the lad in homespun who had spent his years amid the solitudes of these wild mountains, knowing nothing save the fact that there was constant warfare between the poor people who lived among such scenes, and the agents of the exacting government.

And Alec was conscious of a strange feeling as he looked in the face of that boy!



## CHAPTER XVI

## THE MOONSHINERS OF THE BIG SMOKIES

"Who be yuh?"

The mountain boy asked this question as he stood there and stared at Alec. As for the Northern lad, he found himself stirred by a strange, unaccountable emotion, the nature of which he could not just then analyze.

As he surveyed the thin peaked face of the other it seemed to him that they must have met before somewhere; if not in the flesh, then in dreams. Those brown eyes were so familiar; and yet after all the idea seemed absurd; for he had never been down here before, and certainly the young moonshiner could not have traveled in the North at any time.

He had to figuratively shake himself to leave off staring. It was, after all, the sight of that nasty little wound that brought him sharply to his senses.

"My name is Alec," he said; "but you must let me bind up that hurt for you. I'm a pretty fair hand at fixing wounds. You see, I was on a cattle ranch for a whole year, and every cowboy



learns how to take care of himself in case of an accident. Then I've got a chum whose father is a doctor; he's given me lots of hints."

Even while he was speaking Alec had picked up the poor apology for a bandage and started winding it around the arm. At least he might make it serve in part as a tourniquet, and thus help to stop the bleeding somewhat.

"How did it happen?" he asked, gently as he worked.

He did not want to mention the fact that he and his comrades suspected the other was shooting at them from an ambushade, after the habit of these desperate moonshiners, when they had reason to believe strangers might be "revenues."

"I slipped, yuh see," the other replied, with a frown, as though in his mind an accident were an inexcusable crime, and made him simply disgusted with himself.

"You were watching us at the time, of course?" Alec went on, calmly.

"Yes, that's so. 'Taint often we-uns see strangers 'round these diggin's. An' them jiggers yuh rode knocked me right peart. What be they?"

"You know what a bicycle is, of course; you've been in Asheville and seen people riding such wheels?" asked Alec, still working deftly at the wounded left arm.

"I reckon I has; but say, I never see wheels .



that make a hum, and spit out all that noise," the backwoods boy said.

"These are called motorcycles, and they go just like the engines do that draw the trains on the Southern railroad. Do you belong at the cabins we passed just a little ways back?" Alec continued, watching the various emotions that seemed to chase across the bronzed features of the other.

"Me? No, I kim from over beyond the French Broad. My old man is Jenks Brownlow. They calls me Tad, yuh see," the boy went on.

"Oh! yes, I have heard your father's name mentioned in Asheville," Alec said, at which the other burst into a sneering laugh.

"Reckons as how yuh didn't hear nawthin' good sed 'bout Jenks Brownlow, mister!" he broke out with. "Everybody sez as how he's the wust moonshiner in the hull Big Smokies; and the revenues'd give more tuh ketch him tuh rights than all the rest put tergether; but they jest cain't do it. He's like a weasel, an' ain't to be kotched asleep."

Alec wondered what it was about this boy that seemed to draw him. Rough he was, and uncouth; yet beneath it all there seemed something he could not just grasp—there were traces of better things that flashed up now and then, though speedily buried again by the ignorance



and uncouth speech that marked the uneducated boy of the North Carolina mountains.

Just then his eye fell upon something that lay beside the dingy jacket with the torn sleeve; having possibly fallen from a pocket when the wounded lad thrown his outer garment off.

It was a well-thumbed book, apparently such as might be used in school.

He had now finished his job as well as the circumstances allowed; and stooping over, he picked the little volume up. Just as he suspected, it proved to be a school book; and judging from the color of the leaves, some one had spent much time poring over what was to be found between the torn covers.

"Is this yours?" he asked, with a reassuring smile.

The mountain boy had frowned, and then made a movement as though he were strongly tempted to snatch the precious volume from his hands.

He nodded his head in the affirmative, and his teeth came together with a click; while a look of resolution settled on his face.

"Do you go to school, then?" continued Alec, believing he was touching on a subject that might open a way to the other's heart.

"No, but I wants tuh the wust kind," came the answer.



“Did you do this writing in here?”

“Purty nigh all on it. I follered arter what I found thar, yuh see. Bouten the book at a store in Asheville last time I was thar. Savin’ up every cent I kin git tuh go tuh school next year; but dad sez as how it’s all tomfoolery. I ain’t gwine tuh be skeered outen it. Jest got tuh know all ’bout things. Somethin’ inside o’ me sez every time they crosses me, ‘Jest keep agoin’, an’ ye’ll git thar yit, Tad.’ An’ they jest caint stop me nohow; foh I’m bound tuh larn!”

“That sounds fine!” said Alec, thrilled somehow by the way the other laid down the law to himself. “And I feel sure you’ll succeed when once you get started. But did you know we were coming along here? Was that why you hid up behind these bushes, and watched us?”

“I heerd the n’ise, and was skeered,” the other frankly confessed. “Tain’t thet I’m a coward neither, mister; nobody calls me thet; but yuh see, I didn’t know wot it was. An’ I was a watchin’ o’ yuh w’en my foot slipped, an’ the gun she went off. Furgot I hed ther hammer set. Mighta blowed my head off as like as not.”

“But you saw those four smokes, and knew strangers were coming into the mountains, didn’t you?” persisted Alec.

“Shore I did; but thet didn’t skeer me, not any. They sez as how I help the ole man with the



mash, but they gotter prove it. I ain't achin' tuh keep along in sech a pore bizness. I wants tuh be somethin' better nor thet," and the look that accompanied these homely words gave Alec another strange thrill, it seemed so familiar to the boy.

"I'm sure you will be some fine day!" he exclaimed, warmly, "and I hope to meet up with you again. Perhaps you might get a start in saving up enough to commence school, by helping me out right now. I'm willing to pay you well for your services."

The other instantly frowned, and instinctively drew away from him.

"Better not say sich things tuh me, mister," he observed, coldly. "They never hev the least mercy on informers 'round these diggin's. I wanten go to school alfred bad, but not so bad as tuh give away my ole man, or any o' the boys."

"Oh! you mistake me; I didn't mean that at all!" Alec hastened to exclaim. "What I meant was an entirely different thing. We are boys from the North, and have no connection whatever with the Government. If I saw a still I would not believe it my duty to tell any one about it. No man, woman or child in the Big Smoky mountains has any reason to fear betrayal at the hands of myself or three chums."

The other stared at him steadily, as though



trying to read what might lie back of these words; and once more Alec experienced that odd sensation as he looked into those brown eyes, so like a pair he had known somewhere.

"All the same, I'd 'vise yuh all tuh turn 'round, an' git outen hyah right peart. Strangers as kims into the Big Smokies takes chances. If it had a-ben a moonshiner up hyar 'stead o' me, fust thing yuh knowed p'r'aps they's be'n a shot, and wun o' yuh'd be'n throwed cold. That's the way they does up hyah. Best cl'ar out while yuh kin. I'm a-tellin' yuh this a-cause I like yuh. An' seems like yuh done a right smart job with thet arm."

"But before I leave you I want to ask a question," Alec persisted.

"Better not, mister, 'case I dassent answer, nohow," said the other, firmly.

"But this hasn't the least thing to do with moonshiners, or anything they make up here in the Big Smokies, I promise that," Alec went on.

"All the same," the mountain boy returned, "questions be ugly things mebbe. If yuh don't ask me sech, then I don't need tuh lie. They tried tuh make me tell onct whar the ole man hed his place, but sho! wild hosses cudn't a-torn thet from me. If so be yuh wants tuh keep on a-bein' frien's wi' me, don't ask me anything, mister."

"You're a strange boy, Tad," said Alec, shak-



ing his head as he tried to consider how he might mention the name that was in his mind, without incurring the suspicion of the other.

"They all sez the same, an' I knows it too. Thet's a-cause I'm allers yearnin' for sumpin' thet keeps a-danglin jest outen my reach. I mout as well tell yuh right now thet ye're a-headin' intuh the deestricht o' Jenks Brownlow. Every mile yuh goes in the d'rection o' the French Broad the danger doubles. Yuh soon caint take a step but wot yuh be seen, an' a gun follers yuh, sartin. Best turn back hyah w'ile yuh has the chanct."

How they seemed to ring the changes on that one idea—that peril lurked behind every bush and tree for strangers in the Big Smokies. But Alec was not yet wholly convinced that retreat would be the part of wisdom; his heart was so set on carrying out that wish of his lamented father to the letter.

He turned again to the mountain boy, with the intention of mentioning the name of Theodore Warrendale in some way, to see if the other showed any sign of recognition. But his plans miscarried, as so often proved the case.

The other was listening, though Alec's ears had caught no suspicious sound as yet. Suddenly the young moonshiner jumped forward, and with his uninjured hand caught hold of the other, dragging him to the ground behind the bushes.



“Keep still!” whispered the wounded lad, making a savage face at Alec.

Now the other could also catch the sound of voices, and as he looked he saw several gigantic mountaineers come into view, following a trail down the mountainside, each carrying a gun in one hand, and a small keg on the other shoulder!

And Alec knew he was at last looking upon the Big Smoky moonshiners!



## CHAPTER XVII

## TRUE GOLD NEEDS NOT THE GUINEA STAMP

Neither of the boys moved as the four stalwart men passed in single file down a winding trail, apparently heading for the road below. Undoubtedly they had come fresh from some secret "still" away up in the ledges; and either could not have seen the warning smoke signals; or else were reckless enough to snap their fingers at the idea of danger.

They passed not fifty feet away from the bushes. Alec could easily see the face of each man. Had he been a Government informer he might have obtained invaluable information right then and there, upon which to base subsequent arrests. But that did not happen to be his business. In fact, the only thought that beset him was whether any one of those four hardy men might chance to be the much desired Theodore.

He noticed that the boy seemed to be shaking a little, and his eyes gleamed in a strange manner. He had regained possession of his gun; and while he looked at the men through the bushes he half



raised it several times, shaking his head in a way that told of uncertainty.

All of which interested Alec more than a little; for it would seem to indicate that the mountain boy held some sort of deep grudge against one or more of those four moonshiners.

The danger so far as a discovery of the two hiding boys went, had now passed; for the men had gained the road below. A new sensation came near overwhelming Alec; and he gripped the arm of the other, whispering in his ear:

"My three chums are hidden along the road there; will they be discovered, do you think?"

At that the mountain boy shook his head in the negative, saying:

"They cross the road an' keep 'long the trail. If youh frien's knows enuff tuh keep theys heads down, it's all right. Watch an' see."

But now the little file of burden-bearers had crossed the road, and dipped into the brush on the opposite side. Their figures grew more uncertain, and soon only the waving of the bushes announced where they had gone.

Alec breathed easier. Still, he was puzzled at the actions of the other; for the mountain boy was breathing hard, and grinding his teeth as he muttered:

"I shore was tempted tuh do hit thet time. On'y I guv her my promise not to do fur her ole



man, I'd let 'im hev it plumb center then. He orter be shot, the wolf! 'Nother time, p'r'aps, I jest caint hole my hand back."

"Which one was that you're speaking of?" asked Alec, sympathetically.

"Stranger, yuh seen thet feller with the red fox beard, didn't yuh?" the other replied by asking another question.

"Yes, and he certainly was a tough looking citizen," replied Alec. "Is he the one you thought you ought to knock down?"

"He be," the other admitted, frankly. "I don't hardly know w'at kep' me frum doin' it right then, w'en I hed a right smart chanct. Like's not I'll call myself a fool soon, 'cause I was shy on the trigger."

"But you forgot that your gun wasn't loaded, didn't you?" Alec demanded, humorously.

At that the other broke out into a hearty laugh.

"Say, the joke's on me thet time," he said. "I sho must have a pow'ful weak mind tuh let thet git past me. Reckon thet's jest what gripped my hand, and kept me frum pullin' a trigger. They'd heard the snap, and hev pitched a heap o' lead up heah 'foah you could wink twict."

"But don't you know it's wicked to shoot any man in the back, no matter how badly he may have injured you?" Alec expostulated, rather horrified at the matter-of-fact way in which the



other looked at such a thing, which in his mind was a ghastly crime.

"Huh! he never hurt me nohow, stranger," replied the other, a dark, venomous look crossing his face. "I mout a-forgotten if et so be he hed; but he done wuss nor thet, I'm tellin' yuh. He whipped his leetle lame gal nigh to death 'cause she wudn't steal foh him. She ain't got no mother, and I found Sis all bloody in the cabin. Mister, ef I cud a-seen Buck Hanson right then I'd bored him, dead sure!"

"But surely some of the neighbors would punish him, wouldn't they, if they knew about it?" asked the other, startled at the violent passions exhibited by these primitive mountaineers.

"Not any, stranger. Buck he's got 'em all a-crawlin' an' lickin' his hand. They ain't ary wun as dar's go up ag'in Buck w'en he roars. But he's hit Sis foh the las' time, now, I tell yuh," the other boy went on, between his clenched teeth.

"What! she didn't die from her injuries, did she?" demanded Alec.

"Shore not. I done take her away, and hid her in a cave up yander. Foh more'n a week now I fotch her grub, and talk with her. Thet's whar I was a-comin' frum w'en I see yuh on them devil wheels, mister."

"But what about her father—doesn't he hunt for her?" the Northern lad went on.



At that the other laughed harshly.

"Reckon he thinks the wild dogs o' the Big Smokies must a-took her away. Him keer if Sis never shows up? Not any, mister. They's plenty o' 'em left tuh w'uk foh him. And if Sis never gits well, wot good was she to him? I hides her so he won't kill her w'en he gits drunk ag'in. He sed as how he wud, an' he shore will, if he gits a chanct."

"But," said Alec, more deeply interested in this strange boy than ever; "what can you do about it? Do you always expect to keep the poor lame child in that cave like a wild beast? Couldn't you take her to your home?"

"Huh!" said the other with a snort of disgust, "much better off Sis'd be thar'n if she stayed right hum. Jenks Brownlow's new wife's a holy terror, mister. Why, I ain't be'n hum now this three weeks. She's got it in fur me a-cause I tole her book larnin' was the best arter all. She driv me out wid ther broom. Reckon as how I ain't got no hum now, 'cept under my hat," he added sarcastically.

"But what can you do with the poor child? Perhaps there might be some person in Asheville who would care for her, if you'd let me ask," Alec continued, somehow drawn heart and soul into this strange adventure of the other's.

How the face of the mountain boy lighted up!



"Mister, will you tell me sumpin'," he asked, eagerly, and yet with a show of hesitation.

"Of course I will, and help you in the bargain," replied Alec, heartily, "and now what is it you want to know?"

"They's a horspittle in Asheville, I know, 'case I seen the sign w'en I was thar."

"Yes, there's a big hospital; for you know many sick people come down from the North to get well in the balsam laden mountain air. What about it?" asked Alec.

"Does they ask a heap tuh cure a leetle gal o' a crooked back, mister?" went on the other, his whole face lighted up with intense eagerness.

Alec did not laugh. He realized that this was a very grave matter for the one who was seeking information.

"That would be hard to say, I'm afraid. Sometimes they would ask a lot; and then again the price might be small. It would all depend on the ability of the friends and relatives of the little girl to pay," he said, softly.

"She's on'y gut me for a frien', mister, an' all I saved these two years, lookin' tuh git an ed-dication was seventeen dollars. She kims in mighty slow, yuh see, in the Big Smokies. I traps some animiles durin' fur times, an' manages tuh pick up a leetle onct in a while doin' sumpin' erother. But I jest 'bout made up my mind as



how I'd let leetle Sis hev thet money, if so be it'd cure her; an' begin all over ag'in fur my schoolin'. She's sech a pore leetle thing, an' ain't got no chanct like a big strappin' boy hes."

He winked very hard just then as his thoughts went out to the deformed child who had in some strange, unaccountable way appealed to the best that was in him. And as for Alec, he could hardly contain himself. Never in all his experience had he run across a case like this. That this poor ignorant boy, crazy to learn how to read in order to know about the great world without, should be willing to give up his long cherished plans just because a child, that was really no relative of his, had appealed to him as being without a friend in the whole world, was astonishing.

He honored this boy more than he could tell. There must be something like true gold under the rough exterior in a character like that. And then and there Alec determined that he would never leave that neighborhood without doing something to help Tad Brownlow in his ambition to get an education; and also that little Sis, whom he had not even seen, should have her chance for an operation, no matter what it cost.

"Won't you come down and meet my friends, Tad?" he asked, hoping to keep the other with him a little longer.

"Not now, mister. I gotter hurry back tuh



whar Sis is hidin'. Mayhap she seen her ole man pars by, an' if so be she'd be nigh skeered tuh death, she's that feared o' him. But p'raps we'll run acrost each other ag'in, Alec yuh sez as yer name wuz. I like thet. Seems tuh sound like music tuh me. Reckons I must a-dreamed meetin' a feller by thet name. Better turn back, Alec; I'd hate tuh know ye'd run up ag'in my ole man, er any o' the others in the gang. So-long!"

He was gone before Alec could put out a hand to detain him. Once he turned to wave his gun, and send back a smile that made his dark face look really handsome; and then he vanished beyond an uplift of great naked rocks.

Alec started down to the road again, and reaching it he walked hastily along toward the spot where he had last seen his chums. The marks of the motorcycles could be plainly seen on the dirt; and at the point where they all turned off into the bushes alongside he followed suit.

Considerably to his surprise, and not a little to his consternation also, he failed to see any sign of the three motorcycle boys. He even gave vent to a low whistle which they often used as a signal; but though he repeated it several times and louder on each occasion, there came no reply; his chums had strangely vanished.



## CHAPTER XVIII

## FRECKLES TAKES TO THE BUSH

Alec found himself sorely puzzled. He looked around him, and in various ways made sure that this was the identical spot where he had left his friends. Yes, there he could see the marks of the motorcycles in the earth; and here was the very tree against which he had leaned his own machine. He knew it from a peculiar bole that marked the trunk some five feet from the roots.

But Jack, Freckles and Budge, where could they have gone?

They had expected to wait for him, no matter how long he was away. Alec hastily consulted his watch so as to get some idea as to the length of time he had actually spent in creeping forward; and later on in the company of the young moonshiner.

"Not more than half an hour at the most, I'm dead sure," he said, his forehead wrinkled with the strange mystery of the thing.

Then suddenly he remembered something—the four big mountaineers whom he had seen following the secret trail down the ridge! That they were moonshiners he knew from several facts,



since each man was carrying a cask on his shoulder; and then, had not Tad told him so in the bargain?

Of course, if these rough men had come upon the strangers with their motorcycles, they might think it policy to capture them, and carry the young Northerners deeper into the mountains, under the belief that they were spies.

Could this have happened?

Alec looked at it from all sides, and then shook his head in the negative.

"At no time was I far enough away not to have heard sounds of a tussle," he said to himself, in a convincing way. "Budge, I'm sure, would never have given in without a howl; and I did not hear a sound. Besides, those men went across the road, and in another direction entirely. It wasn't that; the boys are not prisoners; or, anyway, they weren't when they left here."

When he reached this point he had a bright idea. The trail! All he had to do was to get down, and examine this, in order to learn several things.

First of all he discovered that when the three boys left that spot it was to plunge deeper into the woods alongside the wretched road.

"That stands for a panic!" remarked the boy who had been on a ranch.

Next he saw that besides the footprints of his



three chums there did not appear to be a solitary track.

"So it is a cinch that they went alone," he decided.

Last of all he counted the plain imprint of four motorcycles.

"They had the good sense to lug my machine along," chuckled Alec.

These several facts in a measure restored his ruffled feelings, in that he no longer believed his friends had fared badly. Something had given them a scare, and Jack had decided that it was good policy to make a change of base. Strange that they had gone so far away as not to hear his signal; but there may have been a good reason.

For instance, could they have seen the gaunt figures of the moonshiner band as they crossed the road; and imagining that it was the policy of the men to surround them, considered it wise to hurriedly leave?

Possibly they even feared that he, Alec, had been drawn into some clever trap by the party who groaned, and pretended to be hurt.

So Alec immediately commenced to pick up the trail. He would find his chums sooner or later, if so be he could only stick to the plain tracks of the heavy motorcycles.

And in ten minutes he realized that the boys were showing plain evidences not only of tempo-



rary panic, but also of having lost their general bearings. They were far from the road, and meeting with all manner of trouble. Here they had ploughed across a soft morass, where they must have sunk in to their ankles; and just beyond they had been compelled to "tote" the weighty machines over a windfall of trees, doubtless the relic of some old-time hurricane.

Frequently Alec would send out that signal whistle, and then listen eagerly for a reply; but none came. He could hear the tapping of a woodpecker in an old tree on his right; the weird screams of a startled bluejay broke the silence a little later; after which a wise old crow, perched on a swaying branch near the top of a mountain pine cawed his displeasure at having the solitude brooding over that vicinity disturbed by the invasion of a stranger.

One thing began to give Alec satisfaction; the trail had turned, as though Jack must have realized how he was piling up fresh difficulties by bearing to the right and was now gradually drawing nearer the road again.

This may have been sheer accident; and again the new leader of the flock might have put on his thinking cap to reason it all out.

To be sure, here was the old apology for a road again; and doubtless the fleeing motorcycle boys had joyfully greeted it; at any rate they no longer



continued to push the heavy wheels through the brush, but had gone along the open.

Now Alec, possessed by an inspiration, got down carefully on hands and knees, the better to closely examine the tracks of the machines.

"They are deeper," he soon remarked, with satisfaction in his voice; "and from that fact I know they must have mounted right here to go on."

When he had thoroughly convinced himself of this important fact a new puzzle confronted the boy. It would be next door to impossible for Jack to lead an extra motorcycle in the further flight. Such a job is looked upon as serious enough under the best conditions; and with unnumbered stones and roots to avoid, it must be utterly out of the question.

What then?

"Sure they must have hidden the Comet somewhere around here!" laughed Alec, as though the idea pleased him greatly.

He set to work investigating; and after all, once he had taken hold of the problem it proved a very simple matter.

A single track led away into the woods. This he followed, noting that while the trail of the wheel was single, there were also returning footprints; which would indicate that the party had come back empty-handed.



In this manner then did Alec walk straight up to a dense copse, and parting the bushes set eyes upon his beloved old Comet!

"Bully! Now I can overtake them easy enough," he exclaimed, as he hastened to lay hold of the precious machine, and drag it forth.

A hasty examination convinced him that there was nothing the matter with Comet. When he started the engine the familiar buzz took up the refrain that stood for business. And so Alec wheeled the machine quickly back to the road.

Although his chums might have even half an hour's start of him, still he harbored no doubt of his ability to speedily overtake them. Budge's presence would seem to assure him of that; for the clumsy rider could pretty generally be depended on to find trouble that must cause more or less delay.

A little beyond that point where he started to ride again Alec sighted three more cabins. As on the previous occasion they seemed absolutely deserted, not a living creature save a lean pig and some half-starved chickens showing up.

Evidently the three boys had looked around as though hoping to strike some one whom they could enlist in their services; but the search had apparently been without reward; for he saw where the three machines had once more passed on.



But by now Alec had reason to believe that he was gradually but surely overtaking the fugitives. The trail seemed warmer; and there were several ways by which he could tell this.

"It's Budge holding them back, I reckon," laughed Alec; "good for Budge; he's doing me a great favor, though he hardly knows it. I would not be surprised to get a peep of them at any minute now, as I turn one of these crooks in the road."

Hardly had he said this than he heard loud voices ahead.

"Guessed it that shot, for there's Budge calling out, and I reckon he's in trouble again," Alec remarked to himself, as he turned the next bend.

But he quickly saw that he was mistaken.

Budge was in plain sight, doing his best to reach a pole to some object that appeared to be stuck in the middle of a thick thorn bush; while Jack was doing the same thing on the near side.

As Alec came around the turn Budge must have just glimpsed him, and without realizing who it was, gave a squeal of alarm, and fell flat on his face, to try and crawl behind a friendly tree for shelter.

"Hello! what's going on here?" demanded the newcomer, as he came to a halt, and leaped from his motorcycle. "Fishing on dry land, are you? Well, that's kind of funny business, I take it, fellows!"



“Hey! get me out first, and have your joke afterwards!” called a distressed voice, and a pair of long legs began to kick up and down in the heart of the thorn bush.

“Why, it’s Freckles!” exclaimed Alec, as though astounded. “Now, what under the sun is he doing there, I’d like to know?”

“Lookin’ for the passage down to China! Searchin’ for signs of gold in this yellow mountain clay! Trying to find a hole to crawl in! But for goodness’ sake get me out before I’m scratched all to flinders!” shouted the one in misery.

Of course Alec understood. The Cannonball Limited lay on its back near by, proving that in an incautious moment Freckles must have collided with an obstacle big enough to suddenly halt his wheel; and as he kept on going, the result was his landing headfirst in this dense thorn bush.

The more he kicked the worse his position seemed to become; so that finally he was reduced to the extremity of depending for succor from the hands of his chums.

Alec readily saw that the rescue would be a difficult one if carried out simply by means of poles. They must go at the root of the matter, and cut away the worst of the bush until the prisoner could be reached.

Accordingly he immediately set to work; and



when he tired one of the others took up the task. Of course Freckles kept up a running fire of comment while the work of rescue progressed. And he said many sarcastic things concerning the pleasure that he was enjoying while posing as the diver.

In the end they reached him; and when two of them could get their arms about the long-legged boy, he was brought forth.

Although he had imagined that he was badly hurt by the thorns, an examination proved that there were only a couple of gouges visible, although several more gave him considerable pain in his legs.

But the motorcycle was damaged! Jack surveyed this seriously, for while he knew he could fix it up again, it would take some time.

Of course Alec was called upon to tell all that he had passed through since leaving his mates. And in turn he learned that his deduction concerning their panic had been the exact truth. They had fled after seeing those terrible looking moonshiners; and the further they went the greater their alarm became.

"But it's all right now," said Budge, heaving a big sigh, as though, like the coming of Sheridan at the battle of Cedar Creek, the reinforcement of one man altered the whole aspect of things, and brought victory out of defeat.



But Alec himself did not feel quite so confident. He had as yet discovered not a single trace of the party whom he wished to find; and it began to look as though they might have to leave the solitudes of the Big Smokies with the object of the expedition far from accomplished.

As the afternoon was wearing away, and they could make but poor progress while Freckles' machine was in need of repairs, it was concluded to camp there in sight of the road.

"We'll keep watch, and stop the first person passing," said Jack.

"Whether he's a moonshiner or not?" demanded Budge, looking worried.

"Sure," broke in Freckles, who had by now recovered from his humiliation, and was feeling like himself again. "We're going to prove to these moonshiners that we're the best friends they've got. When Alec gets his little spiel working he's bound to convince 'em that it's to their interest to help us find Theodore. We've been through a heap of disagreeable things on this trip, fellows; but cheer up! It's always darkest before dawn, they say!"

"Yes, cheer up, fellows," mocked Budge, consolately. "The worst is yet to come; for do you know, we've just got to go to bed tonight without supper! If that ain't enough to break a chap's heart I don't know what is."



"I reckon that's true, boys," remarked Alec. "Unless one of us goes back to those deserted cabins, and tries to forage, leaving money to pay for the same. Perhaps somebody may have come back by now. I've got a good notion to try it myself, while Jack is working at the Cannonball Limited."

Budge was divided in his feelings. He hated to see their leader leave them once more; and yet the thought of securing even the plainest of food filled him with delight. So he just shut his eyes, and grunted. When he heard a popping sound he looked up to find that Alec had gone.

Alec even went so far as to dismount before drawing near the cabins, in the belief that if he rode on, his coming might frighten some one off. But after all his quest was in vain.

The place was more deserted than ever, even the chickens having betaken themselves off to some roosting place in the bush; and the grunting pig had likewise vanished.

Although Alec even invaded the three cabins in the hope of finding a corn pone already cooked, nothing of the sort greeted his eyes. When these natives had fled on seeing the smoke signals they must have carried every scrap of food they had with them to the unknown retreat among the fastnesses of the mountains, where revenue men dared not come to apprehend them as witnesses;



or force women or children to betray the men of the house.

So Alec came back; upon which poor Budge, on seeing that he was empty-handed, clasped both hands over his stomach, and fairly groaned in anguish. For in all his life he could not remember having gone to bed foodless more than two times. It was simply "awful," he declared.

He sat there for a long time as the shadows gathered, and the owls started in to call one another in the depths of the forest. No doubt as he stared into the blaze of the cheery fire, Budge was running over in his mind innumerable feasts he had enjoyed in the past when seated thus.

Unable to stand it longer he concluded that he would jump to his feet. Perhaps he might not suffer quite so badly if he kept walking up and down.

But hardly had Budge struggled to his feet, always something of a task with him after sitting in a cramped position for awhile, than on looking up he gave utterance to a little bleat of alarm, which sound caused the others to also turn.

What they saw was hardly a reassuring sight; for a tall, rough-looking man holding a rifle partly aimed, was standing there not twenty feet away!



## CHAPTER XIX

## THE MOTORCYCLE BOYS PRISONERS

"Wow! don't shoot, mister! We surrender!" exclaimed Budge, throwing up both of his hands as he had doubtless seen done many times in the moving pictures he admired so much.

The other boys were now also on their feet, and staring with mingled feelings at the rough looking customer who stood there like a statue.

Of course none of them made the least movement looking toward any resistance. It would have apparently been the height of foolishness, since they were practically defenseless, while the man had a deadly gun. Besides, the firelight flickered on a grim face, and they could see in that one first look that they were dealing with a man who might prove a hard customer.

Alec was equal to the occasion. He had thought over this very thing before, and even made up his mind as to what their actions must be, should it come about.

"Howdyado?" he called out, pleasantly. "Will you join us at the fire? Sorry we haven't anything to offer you in the way of food; but the



fact is, we've got to go without any supper ourselves, because we can't find any place to get a meal."

The tall, gaunt man took several steps forward, He seemed to be watching them attentively; and Alec could see that his eyes were as keen as those of a hawk. Well, a moonshiner in the mountains along the border of Tennessee and Carolina has need of keen vision to detect the coming of the men who are constantly endeavoring to trap him and his.

When he came closer Alec could see him better. He remembered what he had heard Judge Embree tell about the moonshiner chief, and somehow the idea flashed upon him that he was even now looking on Jenks Brownlow, the notorious maker of illicit sour mash that declined to pay the Government tax, and was therefore outlawed.

"I suppose, sir, you're wondering what we are doing down here," Alec went on, as the other did not seem disposed to speak as yet. "We belong up North; and as I had to come down here to carry out the last wishes of my dead father, and see about some property belonging to me here, my chums concluded that it would be a fine thing to come along. So we rode our motorcycles all the way down here."

He pointed to the wheels as he spoke, and the eyes of the tall mountaineer followed the gesture intently.



Then suddenly turning, the man made a sweeping motion with his left arm. It must have been in the nature of a signal; for immediately heads bobbed up in several places; after which three men advanced toward the fire.

And although the number was the same, Alec readily saw that these were not the men whom he had watched pass single file along that trail, each burdened with a small keg of "mountain dew."

The woods were evidently full of moonshiners—when revenue men happened to be scarce; but let them start a secret raid, and they would hardly be able to come across a single one.

Each of these men also carried a gun of some sort, usually a rifle, and in most cases an up-to-date repeater, capable of doing terrible execution should the owner find himself cornered, and forced to fight for his liberty.

One of them also carried a pot along with him and immediately started in as if intending to get a meal, cutting up some meat, which might have been pork or game, the boys could not tell which.

Needless to say this immediately caught the eye of Budge, who watched operations as if fascinated, rubbing himself the while in congratulation over the improved prospects.

Alec knew that everything depended on his making a good impression on the black-bearded leader; and with this end in view he approached him, open faced.



"We came across several cabins further back," he went on to remark; "but there was not a living soul to be found. Outside of Mrs. Torrey we haven't really been able to meet anybody since coming to the mountains. Her husband used to be my father's guide a long time ago; she told me when she learned my name. Is Gabe with you now?"

The man looked at him closely, and then called out:

"Hey! Gabe, cum hyar."

One of the others approached, looking curiously at the two.

"This yer critter sez as how yuh used tuh be his dad's guide a heap ways back?" Brownlow observed, with a trace of a sneer in his voice. "Sez as how yer ole woman done tole him so. How's thet, Gabe? Kin yuh 'member ennything 'bout it?"

Of course Gabe immediately stared hard at the boy, and something like a look of wonder appeared on his seamed face.

"I am Alec Travers," said the boy. "My father used to hunt down here every year, away back before I was born. And Gabe Torrey was his guide many times. How are you, Gabe?"

He thrust out his hand impulsively. Gabe looked at his chief, and then awkwardly accepted the same.



"I shore reckons it be his boy, Jenks," he said, nodding. "I kin see thuh same look thar. He shore must be a Travers."

"Wot o' thet?" demanded the other, in a surly tone. "'Case yuh knowed his dad aways back ain't no sign the critter ain't sold out tuh the revenues. Didn't he stop over wid Jedge Embree? And don't we hev an ijee thuh jedge is in tech wid the people down at Washington? Reckons yuh better fight shy o' him, Gabe. Mightn't look well tuh be friends wid a revenue spy."

"Oh!" exclaimed Alec, eagerly, "but I hope to convince you that none of us have the slightest wish to harm a living soul here in the Big Smokies. I'm looking for a man my father wanted me to find down here. I've got something for him, something that may turn out to be valuable."

But the man only muttered words under his breath and moved away from Alec, as if determined not to listen longer. Presently he was seen to be talking with one of the others, who left the camp, going back toward the east. Somehow Alec got an idea into his head that the man had been sent to Asheville to learn certain facts in connection with the four boys; and that upon the nature of the report which he brought back depended their fate. He might have a horse somewhere, which he could use to cover the distance to and fro.



It was not a very pleasant thought that so much depended on chance. Alec and Jack found an opportunity to get their heads together, and exchange views. But they were careful not to make it appear that anything unusual was going on; for frequently one of the men would cast dark looks in their direction.

Budge and Freckles did not at first realize the serious nature of their situation. The latter, under the belief that Jack had quite finished mending his motorcycle, approached to examine the same. He was thrilled by feeling something cold touch his cheek as he bent over. Looking up, Freckles was further horrified to find that the chilling object was the muzzle of a gun; while back of it glowered the sunburned face of Gabe Torrey.

"Git back tuh the fire, an' jest leave these heah things alone!" was what the moonshiner said; but Freckles lost no time in obeying the request; and he was shivering as he once again squatted down near Budge.

The latter had been sniffing at the fragrant odors that had by now commenced to escape from the pot that was hung by a camper's crotch over the fire.

"Oh! my, I hope they won't delay too long," he remarked, as Freckles dropped at his side. "I'm that eager for things to begin I can hardly wait."



"You are, hey?" snapped the tall lad, with a sneer that was partly intended to hide his own quivering tones; "well, p'r'aps you won't be quite so anxious when you twist your eyes around, and just note what that feller is practicin' over yonder!"

Budge looked, and then turned deadly pale; for the man in question seemed to be tying a loop at the end of a long rope; while he grinned as though he enjoyed the consternation of the two lads.

"My gracious goodness!" gasped Budge. "What d'ye suppose he's doing that for, Freckles? You don't mean they're thinking of hanging us all up just like we were a string of sausages?"

"I hope not," returned Freckles, himself feeling about as "limp as a dish-rag," as he expressed it. "But they don't seem to take any stock at all in what Alec told 'em. Gee! if we ever get safe out of this scrape, catch me coming to the Big Smokies again! It's me for home, and mother."

"But sure you don't think they'd hang a bunch of jolly fellows who never even lifted a finger to harm anybody?" Budge went on, in a half whine.

"They look like a tender-hearted lot now, don't they?" Freckles whispered. "Make up your mind we're in for a bad time, Budge. And if it does come to the last ditch, please don't disgrace the bunch by crying. Be a man, Budge!"



"Aw! yes," said the other, "that's easy enough for you to say, because you happen to be made different from me. I'm ever so much bigger than you are; and so you see I've got a heap more feeling. But anyhow, if they are bound to hang us, I only hope they let us have a share of that grub first. It won't be quite so hard then."

"Well, I always did say that if you was dying you'd think of eating. What good would grub do you, tell me that?" demanded Freckles, unable to see the humorous aspect of the thing.

"Why, it fortifies the system against breaking down," asserted Budge. "That's why they always see to it that a condemned man gets a good breakfast before he walks out to be plunked off. I'm going to demand my rights in this thing. I'll refuse to play if they won't feed me."

Freckles looked at him as if wondering whether poor Budge could really mean all he said; or was going out of his mind with fright.

"Well, what d'ye know about that?" he muttered to himself, as he continued to watch Budge out of the corner of his eye; "I believe the fellow will be helping himself soon, if nobody invites him. He's going to stand up for his rights; and in this case that means a share of that stew. Wow! Budge is sure the limit!"

Meanwhile Alec and Jack were no nearer a solution to the problem than when they had started talking it over.



"Are you certain that this man is Jenks Brownlow, the man they told us so much about?" asked Jack, in a whisper.

"Oh! there's no doubt about that," replied his chum, quickly. "I remember that he was described to us; and then again, I heard one of the men call him by name. But why do you say that?"

"I guess you've forgotten about Tad," remarked the other, quietly.

"Well, I had, somewhat," Alec answered, frankly. "But how could he be of any help to us in this trouble?"

"You did him a favor," Jack immediately declared. "That wound must have been pretty serious only for the clever way you stopped it bleeding."

"Oh! well, granted that what you say is true, what then, Jack?"

"Why don't you tell Jenks about it?" the other suggested. "He might feel less bitter against us if he knew you'd been of some help to his boy. Perhaps he'd even consent to let us go, if so be we promised to clear out of the Big Smokies, and never return."

"But you're only guessing, Jack. From what the boy said, I imagine they don't care much for him at home. He seems to be made of a different kind of stuff to the rest. It shows in his



craze to get an education. There's something inside him, as he himself said, that is forcing him to want to climb up out of the ditch of ignorance. And that makes the rest of 'em think he's putting on airs, and wants to look down on his family."

"Then you don't think it would pay to tell Jenks?" Jack went on, persistently.

"Well, I just don't know, that's a fact," was his chum's reply. "Perhaps, if we get in a worse corner, I may speak about Tad, and in that way try to make friends with the old man; but he's a holy terror, and I don't fancy we'd gain much by doing it."

"Look at those two sillies hanging over the fire, and waiting for that pot to boil. They actually think they're going to have a square meal," chuckled Jack, trying to put the grim facts out of his mind by appearing amused, though Alec was not deceived by it in the least.

"No, I think you're off there, Jack," he remarked. "Both of them look scared to beat the band. The fact is, they're watching that chap handling that rope yonder. See the grin on his ugly face! He's having what he calls fun, in giving them a cold chill. It's all done for effect, you know."

"I hope so," Jack replied, with a shrug of his shoulders; "because somehow it doesn't seem to appeal to me. If I have to shuffle off, I'd rather



go by some less elevated route than hanging."

"Oh! let's change the subject," laughed Alec; and they did.

A little later on, Alec lay there, watching the scene as depicted by the light of the fire. Often had he sat thus, and fully enjoyed watching his chums going about their several duties. Not so now. The three boys were thoroughly cowed, and sat there in gloomy silence, as though their thoughts brought only renewed mental distress.

The three rough men were squatted close by, and only waiting until the contents of that hanging kettle had been fairly well cooked, when they doubtless meant to partake of the savory, if humble, mess.

Alec was cudgeling his brains in the endeavor to think up some scheme whereby he might enlist the sympathy of Brownlow. Of course the man, like every one else, must love money; if only he could be influenced to take a ransom for the captive four.

The main trouble, Alec realized, was that he might fear lest his motives in accepting the money be looked upon by his ignorant and suspicious companions as in the wrong light, and in the nature of a bribe. And the man who took a dollar from a revenue agent was doomed to an early death in the Land of the Sky.

Turn which way he would Alec could see only



the frowns of misfortune confronting him. For the first time he even began to take himself to task for ever entering upon this search for a party whom nobody seemed to know. It had brought himself and chums into a serious fix; and who could say how they were ever going to get out of it?

As to hoping that they might escape while their captors slept, that was almost too foolish to consider. Like as not the wily Brownlow would either keep a guard over them all night; or else see that they were securely bound before attempting to get any sleep himself.

Alec drew a long breath, oppressed with heavy forebodings. Then, almost in a flash, something happened that seemed to give him a new lease of life. From gloom arose the thrill of hope.

He had been unconsciously attracted by something moving back of the three moonshiners; and as he involuntarily turned his eyes in that direction, judge of his astonishment when he saw a face lifted above a rock, and a hand motioning to him.

And that face he readily recognized as belonging to the young moonshiner, Tad!



## CHAPTER XX

## POOR, UNFORTUNATE BUDGE

"Did you see that, Alec?" whispered Jack, showing that he too must have witnessed the motions of the boy above the rock.

"Yes," replied the other, in the same cautious tone.

"He was trying to catch your eye. I could tell that from the way he looked and acted. Was that Tad?" demanded Jack.

"Yes," said Alec again; hardly noting that he kept on answering so shortly; for he was consumed by an overpowering curiosity to know just how the moonshiner boy could be of any assistance to them.

Would he walk boldly into the camp, and demand that his father allow the boy who had befriended him, as well as his chums, to go free? Well, one look at that forbidding countenance of Jenks Brownlow was answer enough as to what the result of such action was bound to be.

Perhaps, then, Tad might try to go for help, so as to have the boys rescued. That idea had no sooner flashed into the mind of Alec than he



thrust it forth as utterly out of the question. For to bring assistance into these mountains would mean the capture or death of his own father; who was really little more than an outlaw in the eyes of revenue officers, long desirous of taking him.

Was there any other way?

Yes, he might bide his time, and during the night creep into the camp to silently lead the prisoners out of their bondage. Of course that would be welcome, indeed; but Alec winced at the prospect of their having to leave those four precious motorcycles behind, never to be seen again; and they anticipated having so much more pleasure with the machines in the near future, too.

But the case was that desperate they would be foolish if they hesitated about abandoning the wheels, should a chance for escape arise. Money could be obtained with which to buy other motorcycles just as good; while nothing would take the place of human life, or liberty.

Evidently, then, they were in for a long wait, if Tad meant to try and effect their rescue when the three men slept.

He had disappeared now from the vicinity of the rock, and Alec felt sure he saw him creeping away. Fully fifteen minutes passed without anything happening to break the monotony.



The men still lounged there, keeping their eyes on the boys; but it happened that none of them chanced to be looking toward the fire that burned close to the trunk of a fair-sized tree.

Then once again Alec glimpsed something moving. At first he could not quite decide whether it might be a wild animal creeping up to observe what was the cause for all this delightful smell in the neighborhood; or a human being, down on all fours, and advancing with his body close to the ground.

A minute later and he had made sure that it was the latter, because he saw a head cautiously lifted, as though the party were taking an observation.

Evidently the unknown creeper did not wish to be discovered. This must mean that he looked upon the three moonshiners in the light of enemies, at present at least.

Was it Tad? Alec felt positive that he could answer this in the affirmative, even though he had as yet not been able to obtain a good look at the other.

But why was the boy crawling toward that tree, so close to the fire? True, the way the men were lying, none of them was apt to discover him; but could he have any designs on the supper that was cooking?

It seemed like a foolish thought; and yet when



Alec watched him continue creeping around the butt of that tree he saw that the boy was actually heading direct for the fire!

Then, while he held his very breath in wonder and suspense, Alec saw him suddenly raise his hand, and drop a little bunch of leaves into the kettle; after which the moonshiner boy ducked down low, as if afraid lest his act might have been noticed by one of the men.

Alec's own heart was seemingly in his throat with the agony of suspense; but there was no outburst of loud words; neither did any one of the men spring erect, to reach for a gun.

Tad had backed behind the friendly tree again, and was doubtless in the act of scuttling off, as though the object of his secret visit had been fully accomplished.

But what did it all mean? At first Alec was puzzled. If certain herbs would improve that savory stew, why then should the other make such a pretense of secrecy at the time he added them to the mess?

Alec had an inspiration. Perhaps, after all, those herbs were more noted for their medicinal qualities than any property they might possess in the line of seasoning for cooking. Perhaps their addition to the supper of the moonshiners might later on have some wonderful effect in making them very sleepy!



Jack had been fully awake, and also witnessed this strange act of the mountain boy; while Budge and Freckles simply stared, without comprehending a thing.

"What did he do that for?" asked Jack, in a whisper as he crawled closer to his chum.

"I've just reasoned it out," replied the other; "and come to the conclusion that he wants to put the whole bunch to sleep as soon as they've eaten supper."

"Dope 'em, do you mean?" demanded Jack, in amazement and wonder.

"That's my idea. It just can't mean anything else," Alec went on.

"Then we must tell Budge and Freckles," Jack whispered. "It wouldn't do for them to get stupid for sleep just when we have to kick the dust of this place off our feet. I'll manage to get over, and whisper the news to 'em."

"Poor old Budge!" said Jack; "I know it'll nearly break his heart when he learns he can't have any of that grub. He's been sitting there, sniffing at the smell this half hour. He'll take it hard, see if he don't."

He did too; and really groaned when Jack told how the boy had tossed some herbs into the stew, that would do something queer to all those who partook.

"I'm near tempted to take the chances, if they



ask me," said Budge, drawing a long sigh as he looked regretfully at the steaming kettle.

"Well, you'd better not," said Freckles, severely. "How do we know but what the blooming old mess is poisoned by now? What's the use escaping being hung to just turn up your toes to the daisies by way of deadly nightshade, or something like that."

"And even if it only made you dead for sleep, we'd have to go off and leave you here alone to take your medicine, remember that, Budge!" Jack added.

"Oh! all right, then," whined the other, ruefully. "I s'pose I'll just have to give in this time. But I did have my heart set on tasting that stew. Say, d'ye s'pose now a teenty little bit would hurt me, Jack?"

"Perhaps not," replied the other, "but your silly actions might get the men suspicious, and they'd refuse to eat the stuff themselves. Consequence is we'd be prisoners when morning rolled around again; and perhaps in a way to test that rope."

"All right, I'll be good. I'd do anything for you fellows," said Budge with a fine air of martyrdom.

"Sure, we know that," echoed Freckles. "And if any accident should happen to you, we expect to put up a fine granite monument to you, on



which all your good points will be engraved. And above all the rest will be these grand words: 'He could even starve for his chums!' "

Budge may or may not have understood the sarcasm under this veiled honey—but he made no remark. Later on, when Jack was sitting beside Alec once more, they could see how Budge got up and moved further away from the vicinity of the fire, a look of lofty resolution on his pudgy face.

"He's saying, 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' " chuckled Jack. "By going to the windward side of the fire, you see, he won't be tantalized any longer by the smell of the cooking. But look, Alec, I believe the men are going to eat right now."

They were certainly getting to their feet, and drawing closer to the fire. From some source several tins were produced; and after that the fellow, Gabe, acting as master of ceremonies, dished several big spoonfuls of the mess out on each platter.

He even brought one over to Alec, possibly moved by some touch of revived sentiment because of past associations with the boy's father.

When Alec declined it with a movement of the head, Gabe snorted, and turned back. Changing his mind, he offered the platter to Jack and Freckles in turn, each of whom declined without



hesitation. When he thrust it in front of poor Budge the hungry boy actually turned white, and seemed almost on the point of clutching the platter; when a sharp kick on the ankle, from Freckles, apparently accidentally given, caused him to shake his head, and make a grimace.

Gabe looked hard at the boys, as though a dim suspicion had tried to fasten on his mind, but his fuddled brain refused to grasp the situation. Then he stalked back to the log where the others were already devouring their shares with the eagerness of half-starved dogs. He said something that made Jenks Brownlow glance over at the four boys; but what it may have been even Alec's sharp ears failed to catch.

At any rate the three men were all eating now. Gabe had set his pannikin down at first, as though meaning to deny himself. Presently, however, he began to pick a little at the food; and as though the taste finally overcame his scruples he was soon dishing out a second helping, so as to keep pace with his comrades.

Alec only hoped that his suspicions with regard to the plans of the moonshiner boy were not astray; and that something strange was going to follow the placing of those herbs in the contents of the kettle.

But he managed to whisper to the others not to appear to take any undue interest in the



actions of the men, lest they excite suspicion that all was not right. For Budge had been looking over at them eating, with the most forlorn expression on his face imaginable. After that he turned his back on temptation, and closed his eyes so that he might find a little peace.



## CHAPTER XXI

## HOW THE GAME WORKED

"Looks like they might be through eating now," said Jack, after some time had elapsed; and the four boys were lying close together.

"Oh! I wonder if there's any left?" muttered Budge; but Freckles overheard the remark, and whispered to Alec:

"Better keep an eye on that Budge. He's just crazy to take a look-in at that blooming old kettle; and the chances are, we'll catch him scooping out the remains with that big spoon, if he ain't stopped short."

"Not much danger," said Alec, "for I reckon they must have pretty well cleaned the thing out, from the helpings they took. But I'll remember, and make sure Budge doesn't try any foolishness."

"And now, what?" asked Jack.

"Nothing. Just lie around and wait," replied Alec, hopefully.

"You mean we can't do anything to help matters along; is that it?" demanded the other, trying to watch the men out of the corner of his eye, without being seen.



"Of course," was Alec's rejoinder. "If what we believe is so, then in good time you'll see several sleepy-heads around here. There's only one thing I'm worried about."

"What's that, Alec?" asked Freckles, in awed tones, for the tremendous possibilities of the situation were beginning to tell upon his nerves.

"I'm a little afraid of that Brownlow," replied Alec. "He's an ugly customer, they all say; and if he once suspects that they've been drugged, he may try to take it out on us when he feels the sleepy game coming over him."

"What could we ever do against such a big bully?" gasped Freckles.

"Not much in the way of tackling him," Alec went on, his jaws setting in the determined fashion the others knew so well; "but you must remember that I've got an automatic pistol along with me. I'd sure hate the worst kind to have to use it on a human being; but if it came to the worst, I think I would."

"What are they doing now?" asked Budge; whose back being turned toward the three moonshiners he was unable to watch their actions, and depended on his chums to report progress.

"Gabe is yawning and stretching already," said Freckles. "Gee! look at the way he gapes, would you? It's sure getting a good grip on old Gabe, all right. Wish the other two would follow



suit. What! there's the next chap trying his hand now. Always heard yawning was catching, and I reckon it is. And as sure as you live, look at Jenks taking his turn at the job. My! but they're getting to be a sleepy bunch! Alec, how much time d'ye give 'em now?"

"Oh! perhaps ten or twenty minutes," replied the one addressed. "They're apt to try and fight it off, you see. But every time the game gets weaker, and in the end we'll like as not see the three of 'em stretched out like mummies."

"Oh! happy day! Don't I wish it would hurry, though!" muttered Budge; stealing a look around, not at the three men, but taking in the declining fire, and the stew kettle close beside it.

Freckles nudged Alec as if to draw his attention to the fact.

But that party had other things to rivet his attention. He saw that Jenks Brownlow was getting to his feet; although he seemed to be a bit shaky after he had succeeded in gaining an erect position.

He started toward the boys; and Alec's hand crept into the pocket where he kept his weapon. What was the giant moonshiner about to do? Had he any desperately wicked plan in his twisted mind? Would he attempt to injure these boys, under the impression that they might be Government spies, and capable of trap-



ping himself and comrades by dosing them with some sleep-producing drug?

Alec watched the man stoop down. He was securing the long and thin, though stout rope, with which the other fellow had amused himself in fixing a slip noose, just to thrill the gaping Budge and Freckles.

That meant he intended to secure the prisoners, so that even though all slept together, there could be no slipping away on their motorcycles on the part of the boys.

Alec hardly knew what he ought to do. Had the chief been alone, he might have decided to make use of his weapon to stand him off; but he could not ignore the other pair of rascals, who would be apt to spring to the assistance of their leader in case he needed help.

One way or the other, the thing had to be decided quickly. There was really no time for any deliberation; and so Alec made up his mind that, considering what hope they had for a speedy rescue, he had better make no resistance, unless the other started to search him, when he must be ready to defend that precious packet he was carrying on his person.

Roughly Jenks Brownlow ordered Freckles and Budge to back up to each other; and after they had done so, he threw a few loops of the rope around them, knotting it good and hard in



such fashion that, alone and unaided, the two boys could never have succeeded in releasing themselves from the thrall.

“Now th’ rest o’ yuh do ther same!” growled the sleepy Jenks.

Of course Alec and Jack complied, for they realized that things were working as well as they could have hoped; and it would be foolish to arouse the anger of the giant by a refusal to carry out his wishes.

When he had completed the job the moonshiner tested the bonds, and then stood over the bound lads, chuckling; though Alec noted with secret delight that the laugh ended in another furious yawn.

Why, Gabe Torrey was already lying there on the ground like a bag of salt; while the other fellow sat and nodded furiously, as though he could not fight away the terrible drowsy feeling much longer.

Without doubt the sleeping weed was getting in its work beautifully.

Brownlow staggered back toward the spot where he had been squatting. On the way he came across the figure of Gabe, which fact seemed to amuse him considerably. He even stopped and aimed a few kicks at the sleeper; but being too unsteady on his feet to meet with much success, he finally staggered on, muttering heavily, and lurching like a drunken man.



"Bully!" breathed Freckles, who could watch all these happenings, while Budge had his face turned the other way.

"Keep still," breathed Alec, close at hand. "He hasn't given up yet, and if he hears you, it may excite him. Not a move now, or a word above a whisper, till I say so. This is a critical period in the game."

"Oh! do you think it will work?" whispered poor Budge, who was very uncomfortable, lashed back to back with the thin boy, whose shoulder blades, he declared, were poking into him like paddle wheels on a steamboat.

"Looks mighty much that way," said Alec. "Just shut your eyes, and count a thousand, Budge. Before you get to the end of the string the agony may be over."

Silence fell on the camp after that. Both of Brownlow's men had been overcome by the drug Tad tossed in their food, whatever it was. The giant chief fought the drowsiness like everything. Several times he would sit up, and throw his muscular arms upward, as though boxing with an unseen adversary. Every time he started to climb to his feet it seemed to Alec his heart would be in his throat, for he felt so helpless, trussed up in that fashion, just like a fowl for the spit.

But by straining he made a discovery. He



could move his arms, slip them back just a little and forward again. So, indulging in a new hope, he began to seesaw them back and forth. The rope was stretching too, so that when he had kept this movement up for a short time Alec was enabled to draw his right hand free!

The left did not seem to give; but for that he cared nothing just then. What he wanted to do was to secure his weapon, so as to be ready to defend his own life, as well as those of his chums, should that lawless giant take a notion to do anything dreadful, which Alec really and truly hoped might not be the case.

Now he was able to await the outcome in a more contented frame of mind. It could not be for long, since with each recurrence, the struggles of Jenks Brownlow against the insidious monster who was chaining him down became more and more feeble.

"He's gone, too!" whispered Freckles, hoarsely; for he had been watching the attempts of the other to grip his reeling senses with a feeling akin to horror.

"Wait! give him ten minutes. Then if the boy does not show up, perhaps I can get at my knife, and cut this rope. Wait!" said Alec, in thrilling tones that cheered the other unfortunates immensely.

How slow the time dragged along. Why,



seconds seemed hours; and Freckles was almost every minute asking if it were not better that they make a move. But wise Alec had started to count to himself, and in this way was able to reckon time with some degree of accuracy; and he again and again hushed the impatient one up.

"Only three minutes more!" he kept saying. "You've stood it for seven, and surely you can stand that much longer. It's all right! Everything seems to be working in our favor. And the chances are, we'll soon be whooping it up over the road back toward town, without searchlights showing us the way. Patience, Freckles. Just you hold your horses now!"

Looking back Freckles often wonders how he ever managed to hold out during that agonizing stretch of ten awful minutes. Budge was as mute as a clam. Perhaps he was thinking of future possible spreads, where he might make amends for this long period of starvation.

"Oh! ain't the time over yet, Alec," groaned Freckles for the tenth time.

"Just up," replied Alec, cheerfully, and speaking in a louder tone than he had as yet dared use; "and as another piece of good news, let me state that I believe I just caught a glimpse of our friend creeping around that rock. Yes, see,



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there he comes now! He's waving his hand to us, boys! Keep quiet, and we'll be out of this nasty scrape in a jiffy now!"



## CHAPTER XXII

## A STAGGERING SURPRISE

It was a period of suspense all around. Because of the manner in which they had been fastened together in pairs, back to back, of course two of the boys could not easily watch the coming of the young moonshiner. But determined not to be wholly kept in the dark, Budge and Jack managed to twist their necks, and thus obtain a fleeting glimpse of the skulking figure quickly advancing toward them.

Then a keen-edged knife was pressed against the encircling rope in many places, and the coils fell from their limbs.

"Oh! joy!" Freckles was heard to mutter, as though his heart fairly bubbled over with sincere thanksgiving; Budge, too, was mumbling something, the nature of which no one took the trouble to even try to guess.

Although the three moonshiners lay there like logs, and were apparently so overcome with sleep that little danger was to be feared from that source, still Alec realized that he and his friends were far from safe.



Possibly others of the same type might happen to arrive on the scene by a freak of fate, and halt their flight. And besides, they could not find reason to shout until they were well out of the Big Smokies.

Under these conditions, therefore, it was necessary that they lay hold of their several motorcycles, and trundle them off down the road until it were deemed safe to mount and flee, after lighting the lamp with which each machine was supplied.

No need to point out to them where each fellow's wheel was to be found. They had noted this fact dozens of times earlier in the night, while waiting, and hoping for something to happen.

It was indeed fortunate that none of the mountaineers had thus far thought to do the least thing looking toward the smashing of the "devil wheels," as they had called the gasoline-driven cycles. That would have been a calamity beyond anything they could imagine.

Alec was quickly in touch with his faithful Comet, while Jack laid eager hands on his Rocket and Freckles bent over the repaired Cannonball Limited. To each of them the very touch of the metal steeds seemed to bring new hopes and ambitions. Mounted on these speed wheels they could soon leave the dangerous region behind,



loth though Alec might feel about abandoning his quest so soon.

But then, his late father could never have dreamed what perils lay among those same Big Smoky Mountains, when in his last will and testament he requested that his son within two years of his death should himself personally find Theodore Warrendale, and deliver to him the sealed packet marked with his name.

Perhaps from the safe ground of Asheville the hunt might be continued in some manner or other. Alec was set in his ways, and just hated to give in.

"Come, let us get away from here!" he said, in a low tone, as he took a firm grip on his machine, with the intention of pushing it ahead of him to the near-by road.

Freckles gave utterance to a gurgle of apprehension.

"My word! will you look there?" he exclaimed, possibly louder than was prudent.

Startled, the others followed the line of his outstretched finger.

"Budge!" gasped Jack, partly in indignation, and partly in horror.

Alec was prone to let action take the place of words. He allowed his machine to drop back against the tree again, and fairly flew across the camp. Arriving in the neighborhood of the



fire, he clutched the shoulder of Budge just in time to stop that foolish individual from swallowing some of the contents of the kettle.

"Don't you dare taste a bit of it!" Alec hissed in the other's ears, as he deftly snatched the kettle from the hand of the hungry boy, and tossed it in the adjoining bushes. "Come along, silly! Do you want to stay here and starve to death? Quick! they may wake up and get us yet, thanks to your delaying the bunch!"

Budge, overwhelmed by a sense of his own shame, made no effort to resist when, with these energetic words, delivered in a whisper, he was hurried across to where his motorcycle awaited his coming.

One last look backward Alec took of the camp ere he followed the rest down to the road. He would never forget that sight, with the still blazing fire, and the three sleeping moonshiners. Overhead a young moon tried to peep through the branches of the trees to the west of the camp. An owl winnowed from some near-by tree. All else was silence, deep and profound.

Arriving at the road they turned their faces toward the east, since in that direction lay safety. The young moonshiner walked with them, his left arm bandaged just as Alec had so snugly arranged it.

And as the other once more chanced to come



in personal contact with the strange boy of the mountains, whose ambition to get "larnin' " had virtually made him an exile from his own family, Alec again noted with increasing surprise what a queer sensation seemed to pass over his whole system, as though he had been brought in touch with a magnetic battery.

His heart swelled within him as he contemplated what a sacrifice this boy must have made in thus turning against his own, so that these strangers might be saved. He had only the bare word of Alec that they were not agents of the hated revenue men, whom he, in common with all other dwellers in the Big Smokies, hated with every fibre in his body. And yet he had risked everything in order to return the simple little favor Alec had been able to do him.

Could it be that Tad, too, was influenced by some motive, some strange feeling he could not understand? One thing Alec was resolved upon; after this Tad could no longer return to the mountains, and be as he had in the past. His decision had been taken; and he, Alec, would see to it that the ambition of his soul should be amply satisfied.

Such brave thoughts and aspirations as these were thronging the brain of the Northern lad as together they tramped along the road. Already had they put half a mile between themselves and the hostile camp.



"Say, when do we climb on, and spin out of this region?" Freckles had asked as much as three times, being as usual impatient to make better time.

Alec knew that prudence would dictate that they mount and make faster progress than had up to now been the case. And yet, somehow, he seemed loth to give the word. For evidently, unless Tad started on a run, which he could surely never keep up for any great length of time, he must be left behind.

So finally, unable to hold out longer against the entreaties of Freckles, with even Jack growing anxious, Alec determined to make the break. With this idea in mind he halted, and turned to the mountain boy, who was just about his own height though far from being as stoutly made.

"We must leave you here, Tad," he said, thrusting out his hand. "But before I go I want you to promise me faithfully that you will come to Asheville right away, and see me at Judge Embree's. I shall not leave until you come; because, Tad, I am determined that you must have the chance you want, to get an education. And little Sis will be looked after, too, I promise you. If there is any chance to straighten her crooked spine, an operation will be performed. You'll come, Tad—tell me you will!"

He had hold of the other's hand now, and was squeezing it warmly, conscious again of that



sympathetic feeling that puzzled him so greatly.

The young moonshiner seemed to be struggling with some emotion also.

"Yes," he said, "I'll be thar right soon, Alec. It ain't that I wanted tuh be rewarded fur doin' o' this hyah; but if so be Sis kin be made well, I'll feel gladder'n I kin tell yuh. But I wanted tuh tell yuh I re'd them papers yuh nailed on the dooh o' theh cabins down yander. An' I kin tell yuh wat yuh want tuh know."

"Glory be!" ejaculated Freckles; "d'ye hear that, fellows? Tad says he c'n tell us where we can run across Theodore Warrendale, the mystery man who's been like a ghost to us all along. Do so, and please, please hurry up, Tad."

"Is that what you mean—can you tell us?" asked Alec, just as soon as he could catch his breath; for the announcement of the other had certainly given him cause for excitement.

"Thet happens tuh be my name, Alec!" smiled the mountain boy.

Budge, who was employing the time to start his lamp going, gave utterance to a mild whoop, and succeeded in burning his fingers in the bargain.

"Do you mean that you are Theodore Warrendale?" asked Alec, fairly quivering with delight to think that his search had come to such a satisfactory end after all.



"They called me Tad, yuh see; some people sez Ted," answered the other, calmly.

"But your father—the moonshiner, Jenks Brownlow?" asked Alec, blankly.

"Sho, he ain't my dad at all. He picked me outen the river w'en I was a kid. It was flood time on ther French Broad, an' lots o' famblies was washed away. Never larned who I war. Thet name war writ on some clo's I hed on. Be'n thinkin' 'bout it sense I growed up. Reckoned I'd like tuh larn jest who I war. Me'nt tuh, arter I gut an edication. Yep, I'm Theodore, all right."

Alec drew a long breath. Then there might be something in that odd sensation by which he had found himself nearly overcome every time his hand touched that of this mountain boy. Why, oh! why, should his beloved father wish him to come down here to this wild country, and personally deliver to Theodore Warrendale that mysterious packet?

The explanation would no doubt be found in the contents of that sealed document. His guardian had not known, for he had admitted to being utterly in the dark. Who was this strange boy, this Theodore, who seemed to have been in the mind of his, Alec's father?

Perhaps it would have been the part of wisdom to have waited until Tad came to see him at the



home of the judge; but Alec was too overwhelmed with eagerness to delay longer.

A few minutes could not amount to much after all, since Jenks Brownlow and his two comrades were bound to sleep for many hours, thanks to the drug contained in the leaves Tad had dropped in their food. And if any other mountain man happened along, he could be told that Tad was escorting the boys out of the hills, under the orders of the chief moonshiner.

So Alec took from an inner pocket the little waterproof-silk covered packet.

"In my father's will there was a desire expressed that this be given to Theodore Warrendale, who might be found somewhere among these mountains. He also wanted me to be the messenger who would hand it to you—why, I do not know, cannot even guess. Open it up and see what it contains, Tad," and with hands that trembled he passed the precious little package into the keeping of the other.

Wonderingly the mountain boy did as he was told. When the coverings had been removed there were disclosed several sheets, on which Alec saw writing in his father's well remembered hand. There were signatures also, and seals, just as though it might be a document intended to stand legal scrutiny.



The mountain boy looked at it, and shook his head, smiling sadly.

"Reckons I ain't jest able yet tuh read all thet, Alec," he said, regretfully.

"Shall I read it for you?" asked the other, eagerly.

"Ef yuh will. I'd shore like tuh know w'y yer own dad took eny int'rest in a pore mountain boy down here in theh Big Smokies," replied Tad.

Already Alec was reading what had been set down. And his chums watching his face were amazed to see the color suddenly leave it, only to rush back again in hot waves. From this they knew that whatever the paper contained it was exciting their ordinarily composed comrade as they had never seen him aroused before.

Quickly he turned from the first to the second page; and it was evident that he was skimming over what was written, drinking it in ever so eagerly.

Then he suddenly looked up, the paper falling to the road, to be picked up by thoughtful Jack.

"Oh!" cried Alec, "it is wonderful! wonderful! I can hardly believe it is not all a strange dream; and yet he has explained everything so clearly. Now I know why your brown eyes haunted me so, and I kept wondering where I had seen their like before. They belonged to my mother, my



sainted mother! For, oh, Theodore, she was your mother too! And you see that makes us brothers, you and I!" and to the utter amazement of the mountain boy Alec clasped his arms tight around him; while Budge and Freckles stared, and gasped, and grinned their delight.



## CHAPTER XXIII

## CONCLUSION

"Come, Alec," said Jack, presently, when he thought his chum might have quieted down a bit; "don't you think all explanations might be postponed until Tad comes down to Asheville, which can be tomorrow, if he will? We ought to be getting out of here as soon as we can, you know."

"Yes," replied Alec, smiling at his comrade, "if he will surely promise not to fail me. I'll count the hours till I see him again. Just to think that I have a brother, after I had believed I was alone in the world since father died. He was not your father, Tad, though our mother was the same. She had been married before, you see. But wait, and you shall hear it all. I am in a dream. I shall want some of you to pinch me every little while."

The mountain boy apparently was also in somewhat of a daze; for the amazing news had staggered him. But the fact that Alec, for whom he had conceived so great an affection, called him brother, and claimed to have the



same mother, made him smile as long as the motor boys were in sight.

They mounted their machines and put off, all of the motorcycles responding gallantly to the call. Each boy had his work cut out for him so long as that rough and treacherous road lay before them; but Alec managed to look back once, he being at the tail end of the little procession.

He saw the mountain boy still standing in the road; and it seemed to Alec that Tad had his arms stretched out toward him, as though in entreaty. And while it may have been a bit indiscreet, Alec could not for the life of him resist crying out:

"Good-by, brother! Tomorrow, mind, and don't fail me. Bring Sis if you can!"

A farewell wave of the hand, and then the standing figure was swallowed up in the gloom of the valley road.

The four boys kept on along the winding thoroughfare. Now and then Budge managed to get in a little trouble; but fortunately nothing serious developed. And in the end they passed out upon a better highway of travel, with only some twenty miles between themselves and Asheville.

But what was that to such speedy fliers as those up-to-date motorcycles? Had the young riders chosen they might have made the city



in half an hour; even while chasing along the road by the light of their lamps, that shed a long beam ahead, and disclosed every obstacle as clearly as though it had been daytime.

In good season they entered Asheville. The night was still young, and hence Alec decided that they might drop in on the judge without seeming too bold; for he had made them solemnly promise that, no matter when they came out of the mountains, they would make his house their home so long as they remained in the South.

The good judge was somewhat surprised, nevertheless, to see them so soon; for in leaving Alec had declared that they might be gone a week or more. But there was no mistaking the warmth of his welcome; nor that of Gypsy, when she learned who had arrived.

She was having some young friends in for a party; but after that the guests were left to entertain themselves; since she knew from the manner of Alec that something astonishing must have happened.

Great was the amazement of the Embrees when they heard the whole story, and under what strange circumstances the disclosure of Tad's identity had been made known to his half-brother.

And then and there Alec read aloud the contents of that precious paper, which he now looked



upon as the most valuable legacy left him by his dear father.

Of course it took them some time to really understand matters; for there were lots of things which Mr. Travers had not thought to set down, and at which they must guess.

But stripped of all the mystery they came to understand the story as something like this:

Alec's mother had been born and raised down in North Carolina, and that was really where Mr. Travers met her under strange conditions; for he had rescued her from the flood, and later on they were married.

Her first husband, a John Warrendale, had been a fiery young lawyer, of Southern stock; and becoming embroiled in one of the feuds of section, he had been killed under conditions that greatly grieved his wife.

She had been so ashamed of her connection with a family that had become so notorious in the daily papers, that for years she even kept the secret from Mr. Travers; who it appeared did not dream that she had even been married, for she had resumed her maiden name.

Before her death she told him all, and deeply regretted that she had deceived him, from a false sense of honor. At the time he rescued her from the flood she had lost her own little baby boy, which she always supposed was drowned. But



just before the fatal illness came, under which Mr. Travers was taken, a strange story had been brought to the ears of the gentleman, to the effect that there was a boy down in the Big Smoky mountains who went by the name of Theodore Warrendale; and who, the story went on to say, had been snatched from the river many years before.

Had he lived Mr. Travers himself meant to go back to the old scenes, and investigate this story, though he did not have much faith in its truth. But being warned that his time was short, he had written it all out, and added a codicil to his will whereby a certain bequest was to be turned over to one Theodore Warrendale, should such a person ever be found.

Alec's guardian had known of this bequest, though utterly ignorant as to **who or what** the said party might prove to be.

It was all clear to Alec, at least, for he could supply the missing links in the story. Often he wondered how things could ever have come about as they had; but being a boy he was only too willing to accept the facts, and feel that Heaven had been exceedingly kind to him.

Tad should be placed in some good school, where his rough edges might be polished, as he step by step advanced along the line of education his heart craved. And within a year or two



Alec felt sure he would be a brother to be proud of; for he knew there was that in the other to make him a good man.

The chances were that there was little sleeping done by the boys that night, unless Budge may be taken as an exception; and he would always have his rest, even though the heavens threatened to fall.

When another day dawned Alec was the most restless fellow ever seen. He fairly counted the minutes as the long morning dragged past. The others mounted their motorcycles, and scoured all the surrounding beautiful country that has made Asheville so famous among Southern health resorts.

Noon came and went, with no Tad.

When three o'clock arrived Alec could stand it no longer, but with his chums set out along the road over which they might expect the mountain boy to come.

And half a mile outside of Asheville they met a queer outfit, journeying along in the direction of the town. A mule pulled a cart that had home-made wheels, and creaked dolefully as it was drawn unwillingly along the road.

But that was surely Tad seated in front, with a little figure beside him. Alec gave a loud shout as he rapidly cut down the distance separating him from this remarkable conveyance; and was



answered by a wave of the mountain boy's hand.

The mule and cart really belonged to the Torreys. When the woman who had felt such an interest in young Alec, the son of the man she had known long back in the past, heard the story Tad had to tell, she willingly promised to help him get poor little Sis to town, her mother heart being touched by the terrible conditions surrounding the child, with a brute for a father.

So in the end they arrived at the stately residence of the judge, and great was the wonder of the black servants when that quaint equipage drew up. But the judge and Gypsy were full of eager sympathy, and welcomed the strange pair warmly.

A few days later Sis was received in the finest hospital in Asheville, and an eminent surgeon gave them hope that in a reasonable time her malady would yield to treatment, so that she would be permanently cured. But he added, further neglect would have doomed the child to an early death.

And Tad—once the mountain lad was decently dressed, those who had known him of old would pass him in the street. There was a manly, determined look in his face; and the judge knew full well that in all probability Theodore Warrendale would yet not only live down the notoriety that his father's hasty temper had brought



upon the family name, but make it famous at the bar.

For the boy had firmly decided that he must be a lawyer as his father had been.

Judge Embree only too willingly promised to care for little Sis after she came out of the hospital cured, though Alec insisted that a portion of the expense be paid from his abundant resources.

And when he went with Tad to return the quaint mountain mule outfit to the Torreys, the cart was loaded down with supplies intended as a present from Alec to the wife of his father's old-time guide.

Alec never saw either Gabe Torrey nor Jenks Brownlow again; but doubtless when no revenue raid followed the appearance of the motorcycle chums among the Big Smokies, the moonshiner chief must have understood that he had been mistaken in believing the Northern lads to be government spies.

Doubtless Brownlow is still at his old tricks down in that wild country; for as long as the United States authorities try to prevent those rough mountaineers from doing as they please with their own corn, there will be moonshine whisky made in defiance of the law.

And when Alec and his four chums finally started north again, Tad was getting ready to



leave the home of the good judge, to enter a boarding school, where he might make a start along the road to the high goal his ambition had marked out.

Alec hated to part from him; but they would correspond as soon as Tad found himself capable of writing decently; and besides, Gypsy promised to keep him well informed with regard to his newly discovered half-brother.

They had made up their minds to return home by another route, passing up into Tennessee, and from there to Cincinnati; whence good roads would be found all the way to Staunton.

Of that homeward trip we will say nothing, save that they certainly had a jolly good time; also that Budge and Freckles managed to get into several of their customary scrapes, though nothing very serious developed from the same.

"How long were we gone, fellows?" asked Freckles, one evening, as they gathered at Alec's house, where his guardian, who had asked a thousand questions about the eventful trip, always made the other motorcycle chums welcome.

"Just two months to a day," replied Jack, who now kept the log of the up-to-date Club, and had been reading aloud the account of the long journey, in which the wonderful little gasoline machines had proved their value a dozen fold.

"And just stop and think of the queer adven-



tures that we had," remarked Budge, drawing a long breath, as though overwhelmed by the remembrance.

"Yes," Freckles remarked, "and you ought to be proud to say you shared in lots of the said scrapes, Budge. If you could only overcome that weakness you have about talking in your sleep, and grunting like you were having a bad dream, you might in time turn out to be a pretty fair sort of a chum. But we sure did have a great experience. And I reckon the mill will never turn again with the water that is past. Fellows, we'll sure never have such a glorious run again, never!"

But Freckles was destined to prove himself a very poor prophet when he made this doleful prediction; for unknown to the motorcycle chums just then, the future was beckoning to them invitingly; and there lay beyond another series of experiences even more remarkable than those which they had met with on their wonderful trip to the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. So that we can hope, and expect, to meet Alec and his comrades once more in the saddle, out for business and adventure, and always ready to carry themselves as becomes manly American boys.

THE END.



The next volume of the "Motorcycle Chum Series" of books will be found on sale under the title of "Motorcycle Chums on the Santa Fe Trail; or, The Key to the Indian Treasure Cave."



## VON KEMPELEN AND HIS DISCOVERY.

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AFTER the very minute and elaborate paper by Arago, to say nothing of the summary in *Silliman's Journal*, with the detailed statement just published by Lieutenant Maury, it will not be supposed, of course, that in offering a few hurried remarks in reference to Von Kempelen's discovery, I have any design to look at the subject in a *scientific* point of view. My object is simply, in the first place, to say a few words of Von Kempelen himself (with whom, some years ago, I had the honor of a slight personal acquaintance), since everything which concerns him must necessarily, at this moment, be of interest; and, in the second place, to look in a general way, and speculatively, at the *results* of the discovery,

It may be as well, however, to premise the cursory observations which I have to offer, by denying, very decidedly, what seems to be a general impression (gleaned, as usual in a case of this kind, from the newspapers), viz. : that this discovery, astounding as it unquestionably is, is *unanticipated*.

By reference to the "Diary of Sir Humphry Davy" (Cottle & Munroe, London, pp. 150) it will be seen at pp. 53 and 82, that this illustrious chemist had not only conceived the idea now in question, but had actually made *no inconsiderable progress, experimentally*, in the very *identical analysis* now so triumphantly brought to an issue by Von Kempelen, who, although he makes not the slightest allusion to it, is, *without doubt* (I say it unhesitatingly, and can prove it, if required), indebted to the "Diary" for at least the first hint of his own undertaking. Although a little technical, I cannot refrain from appending two passages from the "Diary," with one of Sir Humphry's equations. [As we have not the algebraic signs necessary, and as the "Diary" is to be found at the Athenæum Library, we omit here a small portion of Mr. Poe's manuscript.—E<sup>d</sup>. ]



The paragraph from the *Courier and Enquirer*, which is now going the rounds of the press, and which purports to claim the invention for a Mr. Kissam, of Brunswick, Me., appears to me, I confess, a little apocryphal, for several reasons; although there is nothing either impossible or very improbable in the statement made. I need not go into details. My opinion of the paragraph is founded principally upon its *manner*. It does not *look* true. Persons who are narrating *facts* are seldom so particular as Mr. Kissam seems to be, about day and date and precise location. Besides, if Mr. Kissam actually *did* come upon the discovery he says he did, at the period designated—nearly eight years ago—how happens it that he took no steps, *on the instant*, to reap the immense benefits which the merest bumpkin must have known would have resulted to him individually, if not to the world at large, from the discovery? It seems to me quite incredible that any man, of common understanding, could have discovered what Mr. Kissam says he did, and yet have subsequently acted so like a baby—so like an owl—as Mr. Kissam *admits* that he did. By the way, who is Mr. Kissam? and is not the whole paragraph in the *Courier and Enquirer* a fabrication got up to “make a talk”? It must be confessed that it has an amazingly moon-hoax-y air. Very little dependence is to be placed upon it, in my humble opinion; and if I were not well aware, from experience, how very easily men of science are *mystified* on points out of their usual range of inquiry, I should be profoundly astonished at finding so eminent a chemist as Professor Draper discussing Mr. Kissam’s (or is it Mr. Quizzem’s?) pretensions to this discovery, in so serious a tone.

But to return to the “Diary” of Sir Humphry Davy. This pamphlet was *not* designed for the public eye, even upon the decease of the writer, as any person at all conversant with authorship may satisfy himself at once by the slightest inspection of the style. At page 13, for example, near the middle, we read, in reference to his researches about the protoxide of azote: “In less than half a minute the respiration being continued, diminished gradually and *were* succeeded by analogous to gentle pressure on all the muscles.” That the *respiration* was not “diminished,” is not only clear by the subsequent context, but by the use of the plural, “were.” The sentence, no doubt, was thus intended: “In less than half a minute, the respiration [being continued, these feelings] diminished gradually, and were succeeded by [a sensation], analogous to



gentle pressure on all the muscles." A hundred similar instances go to show that the MS. so inconsiderately published, was merely a *rough note-book*, meant only for the writer's own eye ; but an inspection of the pamphlet will convince almost any thinking person of the truth of my suggestion. The fact is, Sir Humphry Davy was about the last man in the world to *commit himself* on scientific topics. Not only had he a more than ordinary dislike to quackery, but he was morbidly afraid of *appearing* empirical ; so that, however fully he might have been convinced that he was on the right track in the matter now in question, he would never have spoken *out*, until he had everything ready for the most practical demonstration. I verily believe that his last moments would have been rendered wretched, could he have suspected that his wishes in regard to burning this "Diary" (full of crude speculations) would have been unattended to ; as, it seems, they were. I say "his wishes," for that he meant to include this note-book among the miscellaneous papers directed "to be burnt," I think there can be no manner of doubt. Whether it escaped the flames by good fortune or by bad, yet remains to be seen. That the passages quoted above, with the other similar ones referred to, gave Von Kempelen *the hint*, I do not in the slightest degree question ; but I repeat, it yet remains to be seen whether this momentous discovery itself (*momentous* under any circumstances), will be of service or disservice to mankind at large. That Von Kempelen and his immediate friends will reap a rich harvest, it would be folly to doubt for a moment. They will scarcely be so weak as not to "*realize*," in time, by large purchases of houses and land, with other property of *intrinsic* value.

In the brief account of Von Kempelen which appeared in the *Home Journal*, and has since been extensively copied, several misapprehensions of the German original seem to have been made by the translator, who professes to have taken the passage from a late number of the Presburg *Schnellpost*. "*Viele*" has evidently been misconceived (as it often is), and what the translator renders by "sorrows," is probably "*liden*," which, in its true version, "sufferings," would give a totally different complexion to the whole account ; but, of course, much of this is merely guess, on my part.

Von Kempelen, however, is by no means "a misanthrope," in appearance, at least, whatever he may be in fact. My acquaintance with him was casual altogether ; and I am scarcely



warranted in saying that I know him at all ; but to have seen and conversed with a man of so *prodigious* a notoriety as he has attained, or *will* attain in a few days, is not a small matter, as times go.

*The Literary World* speaks of him, confidently, as a *native* of Presburg (misled, perhaps, by the account in the *Home Journal*), but I am pleased in being able to state *positively*, since I have it from his own lips, that he was born in Utica, in the State of New York, although both his parents, I believe, are of Presburg descent. The family is connected, in some way, with Maelze, of Automaton-chess-player memory. [If we are not mistaken, the name of the *inventor* of the chess-player was either Kempelen, Von Kempelen, or something like it.—ED.] In person he is short and stout, with large, *fat*, blue eyes, sandy hair and whiskers, a wide but pleasing mouth, fine teeth, and I think a Roman nose. There is some defect in one of his feet. His address is frank, and his whole manner noticeable for *bonhomie*. Altogether, he looks, speaks, and acts as little like “a misanthrope” as any man I ever saw. We were fellow-sojourners for a week, about six years ago, at Earl’s Hotel, in Providence, Rhode Island ; and I presume that I conversed with him, at various times, for some three or four hours altogether. His principal topics were those of the day ; and nothing that fell from him led me to suspect his scientific attainments. He left the hotel before me, intending to go to New York, and thence to Bremen ; it was in the latter city that this great discovery was first made public ; or, rather, it was there that he was first suspected of having made it. This is about all that I personally know of the now immortal Von Kempelen ; but I have thought that even these few details would have interest for the public.

There can be little question that most of the marvellous rumors afloat about this affair, are pure inventions, entitled to about as much credit as the story of Aladdin’s lamp ; and yet, in a case of this kind, as in the case of the discoveries in California, it is clear that the truth *may be* stranger than fiction. The following anecdote, at least, is so well authenticated, that we may receive it implicitly.

Von Kempelen had never been even tolerably well off during his residence at Bremen ; and often, it was well known, he had been put to extreme shifts, in order to raise trifling sums. When the great excitement occurred about the forgery on the house of Gutschuth & Co., suspicion was directed tow-



ard Von Kempelen, on account of his having purchased a considerable property in Gasperitch Lane, and his refusing, when questioned, to explain how he became possessed of the purchase-money. He was at length arrested, but nothing decisive appearing against him, was in the end set at liberty. The police, however, kept a strict watch upon his movements, and thus discovered that he left home frequently, taking always the same road, and invariably giving his watchers the slip in the neighborhood of that labyrinth of narrow and crooked passages known by the flash-name of the "Dondergat." Finally, by dint of great perseverance, they traced him to a garret in an old house of seven stories, in an alley called Flätplatz ; and, coming upon him suddenly, found him, as they imagined, in the midst of his counterfeiting operations. His agitation is represented as so excessive that the officers had not the slightest doubt of his guilt. After handcuffing him, they searched his room, or rather rooms ; for it appears he occupied all the *mansarde*.

Opening into the garret where they caught him, was a closet, ten feet by eight, fitted up with some chemical apparatus, of which the object has not yet been ascertained. In one corner of the closet was a very small furnace, with a glowing fire in it, and on the fire a kind of duplicate crucible—two crucibles connected by a tube. One of these crucibles was nearly full of *lead* in a state of fusion, but not reaching up to the aperture of the tube, which was close to the brim. The other crucible had some liquid in it, which, as the officers entered, seemed to be furiously dissipating in vapor. They relate that, on finding himself taken, Von Kempelen seized the crucibles with both hands (which were encased in gloves that afterward turned out to be asbestic), and threw the contents on the tiled floor. It was now that they handcuffed him ; and, before proceeding to ransack the premises, they searched his person, but nothing unusual was found about him, excepting a paper parcel, in his coat pocket, containing what was afterward ascertained to be a mixture of antimony and some *unknown substance*, in nearly, but not quite, equal proportions. All attempts at analyzing the unknown substance have, so far, failed, but that it will ultimately be analyzed, is not to be doubted.

Passing out of the closet with their prisoner, the officers went through a sort of ante-chamber, in which nothing material was found, to the chemist's sleeping-room. They



here rummaged some drawers and boxes, but discovered only a few papers, of no importance, and some good coin, silver and gold. At length, looking under the bed, they saw a large, common hair trunk, without hinges, hasp, or lock, and with the top lying carelessly across the bottom portion. Upon attempting to draw this trunk out from under the bed, they found that, with their united strength (there were three of them, all powerful men), they "could not stir it one inch." Much astonished at this, one of them crawled under the bed, and looking into the trunk, said:

"No wonder we couldn't move it—why, it's full to the brim of old bits of brass!"

Putting his feet, now, against the wall, so as to get a good purchase, and pushing with all his force, while his companions pulled with all theirs, the trunk, with much difficulty, was slid out from under the bed, and its contents examined. The supposed brass with which it was filled was all in small, smooth pieces, varying from the size of a pea to that of a dollar; but the pieces were irregular in shape, although all more or less flat—looking, upon the whole, "very much as lead looks when thrown upon the ground in a molten state, and there suffered to grow cool." Now, not one of these officers for a moment suspected this metal to be anything but brass. The idea of its being *gold* never entered their brains, of course; how *could* such a wild fancy have entered it? And their astonishment may be well conceived, when next day it became known, all over Bremen, that the "lot of brass" which they had carted so contemptuously to the police office, without putting themselves to the trouble of pocketing the smallest scrap, was not only gold—real gold—but gold far finer than any employed in coinage—gold, in fact, absolutely pure, virgin, without the slightest appreciable alloy!

I need not go over the details of Von Kempelen's confession (as far as it went) and release, for these are familiar to the public. That he has actually realized, in spirit and in effect, if not to the letter, the old chimera of the philosopher's stone, no sane person is at liberty to doubt. The opinions of Arago are, of course, entitled to the greatest consideration; but he is by no means infallible; and what he says of *bismuth*, in his report to the academy, must be taken *cum grano salis*. The simple truth is that up to this period, *all* analysis has failed; and until Von Kempelen chooses to let us have the key to his own published enigma, it is more than probable that the



matter will remain, for years, *in statu quo*. All that yet can fairly be said to be known, is, that "pure gold can be made at will, and very readily, from lead, in connection with certain other substances, in kind and in proportions, unknown."

Speculation, of course, is busy as to the immediate and ultimate results of this discovery—a discovery which few thinking persons will hesitate in referring to an increased interest in the matter of gold generally, by the late developments in California; and this reflection brings us inevitably to another—the exceeding *inopportuneness* of Von Kempelen's analysis. If many were prevented from adventuring to California, by the mere apprehension that gold would so materially diminish in value, on account of its plentifulness in the mines there, as to render the speculation of going so far in search of it a doubtful one—what impression will be wrought now, upon the minds of those about to emigrate, and especially upon the minds of those actually in the mineral region, by the announcement of this astounding discovery of Von Kempelen? a discovery which declares, in so many words, that beyond its intrinsic worth for manufacturing purposes (whatever that worth may be), gold now is, or at least soon will be (for it cannot be supposed that Von Kempelen can long retain his secret) of no greater value than lead, and of far inferior value to silver. It is, indeed, exceedingly difficult to speculate prospectively upon the consequences of the discovery; but one thing may be positively maintained—that the announcement of the discovery six months ago would have had material influence in regard to the settlement of California.

In Europe, as yet, the most noticeable results have been a rise of two hundred per cent. in the price of lead, and nearly twenty-five per cent. in that of silver.



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